

LETTERS
ON
PREJUDICE.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

IN WHICH
THE NATURE, CAUSES, AND CONSEQUENCES
OF
PREJUDICE IN RELIGION
ARE CONSIDERED :

WITH
AN APPLICATION TO THE PRESENT TIMES.

Though we wish heartily that all controversies were ended, as we do that all sin were abolished, yet we have little hope of the one or the other, till the world be ended. And in the meanwhile think it best to content ourselves with, and to persuade others unto, an *unity of charity* and *mutual toleration*; seeing God hath authorized no man, to force all men to *unity of opinion*. *Chillingworth.*

Let us not therefore, judge one another any more. *Romans, chap. 14 v. 13*

LONDON:
PRINTED FOR T. CADELL, IN THE STRAND;
AND W. BLACKWOOD, EDINBURGH.

1822.

PREFACE.

THE first thought of writing the following letters, was suggested by various casual conversations on the subjects to which they refer. The object in the publication of them, has been to serve the general cause of religion, with as little offence as possible to any of its friends, whatever peculiar opinions they may hold, or to whatever party in the Church, they may be attached.

The plan has necessarily partaken of the desultory character of those conversations in which it originated ; but it has been the author's endeavour to give the work as much unity, as the variety of the subjects would allow. The Letters have extended, both in length and number, beyond the original intention ; though much has yet been left unsaid, from an apprehension of

too much encroaching upon the patience of the reader.

The excitement of a very lively or general interest, is hardly to be expected, in a work of this nature; nor can the praise of originality be sought, in the discussion of subjects connected with religion. Yet the author ventures to hope, that the *object* of these Letters may obtain for them, some share of the public attention and indulgence; and commits this humble work to the protection of HIM, in whose service it has been conscientiously undertaken.

CONTENTS

OF

THE FIRST VOLUME.

LETTER I.

INTRODUCTORY LETTER.

The subject proposed. — Partial views, the cause of discrepancy and inconsistency in religion. — Thoughts on scepticism. — Its probable origin, in some cases. — Probable deductions of a pious mind, from the same premises. — Reasonableness of religion, upon metaphysical principles. — Suitableness and sufficiency of the historical evidences of Revelation, for the purpose of general conviction.

LETTER II.

NECESSITY OF DECISION IN RELIGIOUS PROFESSION.

Religious controversy generally injurious to charity. — Earnest, in proportion to the supposed importance of its object. — Earnestness in defence of religion, laudable. — Importance of religion, to society. — Particularly as a standard of morals. — Uncertainty of moral science, without it. — Prudence of supporting religion, upon these considerations. — Duty of supporting it, upon Christian principles.

LETTER III.

NECESSITY OF DECISION IN RELIGIOUS PROFESSION.

Consistency of religion with reason. — Ill effect of a jealousy of reason in religion. — Consequent neglect of theology. — Capricious association of scepticism, with superiority of talent. — Sacrifice of principle, to literary civility or vanity. — This mischief much abated. — Increasing influence of religion. — Obstructions to this influence. — Conclusion.

LETTER IV.

VARIOUS MODES OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION.

Prejudice. — Definition of it. — Various subjects on which it may be entertained. — Intellectual and social. — Moral, political, and religious. — The former, comparatively harmless. — Sometimes beneficial. — The latter, injurious, — and how. — Varieties of prejudice in religion. — Security and precipitance of judgment. — Latitudinarianism. — Monopoly of truth. — Moderation of the Church of England. — Prejudices inconsistent with this moderation. — Prejudice, as connected with particular names and principles. — Not to be confounded with acuteness of religious feeling. — Zeal and prejudice distinct. — Prejudices of passion. — How to be avoided.

LETTER V.

VARIOUS MODES OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION.

Influence of prejudice, in general literature. — This influence injurious to Christianity. — Successfully re-

sisted by Christian writers. — Prejudices which separate Christians of the same church. — Personal prejudice; where obvious. — Necessity of self-examination. — Prejudice, sometimes more ingenuous and respectable; but dangerous, as leading to uncharitable judgment. — Prejudice of interest. — Prejudice of feeling. — Mutual estrangement, arising from these causes.

LETTER VI.

VARIOUS MODES OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION.

Distinction of principle. — Jealousy resulting from it. — Different explication of doctrines equally acknowledged. — Arises chiefly from neglect of definition. — Faith and works. — Regeneration. — Justification. — Sanctification. — Arbitrary connection of some Scripture doctrines. — Consequences charged too strictly, on both sides. — Instruction to be drawn from these differences. — Humility. — Value of Scripture. — Duty and necessity of Christian union, and of charitable judgment.

LETTER VII.

RISE AND PROGRESS OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION.

The subject continued. — A regular disquisition not attempted. — Evidence of the truth of Christianity, strengthened by its moral effects. — Consequent responsibility of professors. — First controversies on fundamental articles. — Necessity of controversy, when such are attacked. — Spirit generated by con-

troversial habits. — Effects of the Reformation in this respect. — Misconstructions of infidelity. — Apparent division between Christians injurious in other respects.

LETTER VIII.

THE QUESTION, “WHENCE COME DIVISIONS?” ANSWERED.

The enquiry, “whence come divisions?” answered by Saint James. — Individual cultivation of charity, the best principle of reformation in this respect. — Inconsistency — precipitance — and partiality — too often found on all sides. — Prejudices of severity. — Of levity. — The latter particularly dangerous. — And why. — The indulgence here pleaded for, limited to opinion, and founded upon the consciousness of universal fallibility. — Probable causes of some of our minor distinctions.

LETTER IX.

INCIDENTAL CAUSES OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION.

Causes of prejudice in religion. — Incidental and moral. Incidental causes. — Probable causes, of the prevailing bias towards Calvinism. — Influence of example and association. — Previous impressions. — Sense of personal guilt. — Serious habits attractive in such a case. — Humility of judgment, attendant on recent conversion. — Differences of practical discipline. — Distinctions arising from thence. — Present parties in the Church. — Natural association of serious persons with each

other. — Apprehension of the charge of Calvinism. — Probable means of counteracting these prejudices. — Early Calvinism. — Recapitulation. — Conclusion.

LETTER X.

MORAL CAUSES OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION.

Moral causes of prejudice. — Pride. — Pride of hereditary opinion. — Pride of innovation. — Pride of consistency. — Curiosity. — A probationary quality. — Its misapplication upon religious subjects, a source of error, and of prejudice in opinion. — Personal prejudice the result. — Zeal. — A probationary quality. — Its abuse, injurious; but its absence, destructive to religion. — Misapplication of zeal. — Gradual aggravation of divisions. — Necessity of distinguishing zeal, from temper. — Best mode of ascertaining this distinction. — Universal fallibility. — No compromise of fundamental principles. — Practical zeal.

LETTER XI.

MORAL CAUSES OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION.

Moral causes of prejudice, continued. — Interest. — Universal influence of this motive. — Its existence in various combinations. — Its influence, in exciting opposition to a national church. — In promoting association with it. — Necessity of a careful examination of motives. — Some current misconstructions and prejudices on this subject.

LETTER XII.

THE MORAL CAUSES OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION.

Moral causes of prejudice continued. — Ignorance. — General ignorance, a common cause of the success of infidel writings. — Partial ignorance, a cause of prejudice in religion. — Indolence. — Disproportionate attention to subordinate points. — Passion, or prepossession, another cause of prejudice. — Applicable either to doctrine, or to persons. — Doctrinal prejudice, the result of personal partialities. — Consequent jealousies. — Influence of these impressions, upon the judgment. — Opposite effects of prejudice. — Moral injury arising from the above causes. — Influence of pride, in promoting prejudices of passion.

LETTER XIII.

SOME OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION.

Consequences of religious prejudice. — Division. — Rivalship. — Effect of controversial habits. — Accumulation of questions. — Scepticism. — Loss of time, if subtracted from practical objects. — Prejudice of connecting religion with mediocrity of talent. — Compatibility of piety, with genius. — Peculiar advantages in their association. — Abuse of genius, a cause of the prejudice against it. — This prejudice acted upon by infidels. — Expense of intellect in unimportant controversies, another source of prejudice. — Obstructions to charity. — Separation in pious and charitable offices. — Other effects of prejudice. — Union, the best security of the church. — Conclusion.

LETTER XIV.

HAS RELIGIOUS EDUCATION A TENDENCY TO EXCITE
PREJUDICE?

Religious education considered, in connection with the subject of the foregoing letters. — Education of the poor — a measure of prudence — a duty. — An impartial education unattainable. — Education without principle, pernicious. — Religion, the only basis of sound principle. — Lawfulness, and prudence, of inculcating the principles of the Church. — Advantage of the national schools. — Best mode of maintaining and improving this advantage. — Such an education, not likely to increase the influence of religious prejudice. — Not inconsistent with liberality.

LETTER XV.

THE BIBLE SOCIETY.

Of the Bible Society, as connected with the general subject. — Circulation of the Bible, a Protestant principle; and the distinction of all the Protestant churches. — Some objections noticed. — Principles and practice of the Reformers, with respect to the circulation of the Bible. — Subsequent abuses, an occasion of prejudice. — Decline of religion under Charles II. — Revival under William and Mary. — Religious associations connected with the Church. — Jealousy entertained of these associations. — Origin of the Societies for Promoting Christian Knowledge, and for the Propagation of the Gospel. — Similarity of the history of these institutions, with that of the Bible Society. —

Distinctions, and their causes. — The open principle of the Bible Society, a recommendation to the first eminent Churchmen who joined it.

LETTER XVI.

THE BIBLE SOCIETY.

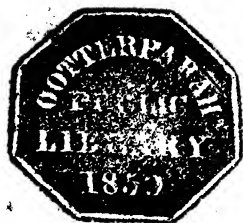
The same subject continued. — Jealousy entertained by the Church, of the Bible Society. — Union with it, the best security against the dangers apprehended. — Real danger to the Church, consists in the revulsion of sentiment, produced in the advocates of the Bible Society, by the vehemence of some of its opponents. — Principle of the Society, not objected to, in its foreign relations. — Domestic objections. — Association with dissenters. — Encouragement of self-sufficiency and conceit. — Consequent alienation from the Church and ministry. — Examination of these objections, and of others connected with them. — Jealousy entertained by the friends of the elder societies. — No necessary incompatibility of interest between them. — Proof of this, in the simultaneous growth and prosperity of various charitable institutions.

LETTER XVII.

THE BIBLE SOCIETY.

The same subject continued. — Revulsion of sentiment, produced by the opposition to the Bible Society. — Depreciation of all comment upon Scripture. — Fallacy of this objection. — Warmth of both parties. —

Principle of popular association, objected to. — Purposes of such association, should be considered. — Possibility of abuse, and necessity of guarding against it. — Indiscreet language at public meetings — has been discouraged, and might be still further restrained. — Final triumph of the Bible Society, probable. — And desirable, in the present state of religion. — The Church might have stood, and might yet stand, at the head of this Society. — Conclusion.



LETTERS ON PREJUDICE.

LETTER I.

INTRODUCTORY LETTER.

THE SUBJECT PROPOSED.—PARTIAL VIEWS THE CAUSE OF DISCREPANCY AND INCONSISTENCY IN RELIGION.—THOUGHTS ON SCEPTICISM.—ITS PROBABLE ORIGIN IN SOME CASES.—PROBABLE DEDUCTIONS OF A PIOUS MIND FROM THE SAME PREMISES.—REASONABLENESS OF RELIGION UPON METAPHYSICAL PRINCIPLES.—SUITABLENESS AND SUFFICIENCY OF THE HISTORICAL EVIDENCES OF REVELATION FOR THE PURPOSE OF GENERAL CONVICTION.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

I DARE not refuse to plead guilty to your charge of weighing, and doubting, and refining, and distinguishing, upon many of the questions discussed between us; and I fear that I must never look for the approbation which an entire concurrence in the views of any one class or party might ob-

tain for me. Yet I cannot persuade myself that this habit has its origin in a cold heart, or a sceptical temper; neither can I allow you to question my orthodoxy, if, diffident of myself, I am fearful of judging my neighbours. You will say that I give no proof of this diffidence, in attempting an examination of some of those shades of opinion upon which our religious parties are so much divided; or rather of the prejudice in which this division originates;—yet I cannot help anticipating some advantage both to you and myself, in an enquiry of which Truth is the object, and Charity the principle.

You say, (and in the main very justly,) that where religious differences run high, it is absolutely necessary to take a decided part; and you might have quoted historical precedent for your opinion, (at least so far as the general rule can be sanctioned by the analogy of a civil case,) if you had recollected the celebrated Athenian law, which condemned neutrals in divisions of the state.

It is, however, unnecessary to refer either to secular or heathen precedent for the establishment of a Christian principle; and in support of the primary duty of firmness and decision in general Christian practice, you will find me, I trust, as strenuous as you can desire. To this duty, indeed, I would first call your attention, as forming the only legitimate foundation of charity in religion; for, surely, that temper deserves not so honourable a name, which arises from an indifference to the truth of Divine Revelation, or a latent, if not an avowed disbelief of the evidence upon which that truth is established.

Indeed, in the broad question of religion itself, considered especially with a reference to its practical bearing upon the consciences of those who acknowledge its divine authority, revelation and experience combine to prove the guilt and danger of indecision; and its folly would be equally evident, did not passion and temptation too often close the eyes and the understanding against the light of reason and of scripture.

Where the object in question is eminently important, and the distinction between right and wrong in conduct and principle, is obvious and definite, it can be only from a culpable indifference, or a still more culpable disaffection, if the right path is not seen, and when seen, is not followed. Of such indifference we have a strong censure from the divine authority itself, in the indignant reproach to the Laodicean church : “ I would thou wert cold, or hot.” And it may furnish us with matter for serious reflection, to observe that even where there is an unhesitating admission of right principles, and a cordial acquiescence in orthodox opinions, (I use the word in its legitimate, not in its party sense,) there is often a reluctance to bring those principles into any practical operation.

It would appear that such reluctance must arise, if not from a defect in the principle, at least from an imperfect apprehension of it ; and that any conviction, clearly impressed upon the mind, would have a proportionate influence on the conduct ;

and such, indeed, would be invariably the result, if the speculative doctrines of Christianity were not too often separated from their practical consequences ; — if it were not too much the habit to consider it as a system of opinions, without reflecting that it is also a table of duties ; to trust in its promises, without adverting to its threats ; to aspire to its rewards, without submitting to its obligations ; to look for the recompense of faith, without that virtue which is its only evidence ; and to expect remuneration for good works, independently of that faith which alone constitutes their value, and of that sacrifice which alone secures their acceptance.

From such partial and imperfect views of religion, many discrepancies in opinion must arise, as well as many deficiencies in conduct ; and the most obvious and important truths may fail of their practical effect, through inadequate apprehension, or erroneous application. There is no truth, for instance, more universally acknowledged by professors of Christianity, than that a

decided enmity subsists between the world and the gospel. That Christ hath no concord with Belial; that God and Mammon cannot be at once the objects of our allegiance; that the glittering toy of present popularity may be purchased at the price of future peace, and the paltry triumph of ambition, in this world, preferred to the hope of glory in the next. In all its bearings and relations the world is thus declared to be hostile to religion; the Christian life is pronounced a state of warfare, and neutrality is stigmatized with a reproach little short of reprobation. It may be farther observed, that this neutrality is commonly but of short continuance; and from the natural tendencies of the human character, as well as from the influence of external temptation, is too likely to terminate in more active and palpable rebellion. To the infringement of a law, whose express object it is to restrain and reform the corrupt principles of our nature, it is obvious that we must, on those very principles, incline; and it is a natural consequence, that we should be anxious to disprove the

authority which we are desirous to disobey ; that men whose deeds, or at least whose inclinations, are evil, should love darkness rather than light.

There are some, indeed, whose indifference to the truth of Divine Revelation, may be traced to a different source. Yet even here, I think, we shall find it generally the offspring of pride ; and in the same principle we shall also discern the root of their subsequent hostility. There is an indefinable feeling of humiliation united with the conviction of ignorance, and a consequent anxiety to investigate subjects supposed to be involved in particular obscurity. Under this anxiety, there is, perhaps, no state of mind so unhappy as that of fluctuation between contending opinions. It may seem paradoxical to assert, that this very circumstance has contributed to increase the influence of scepticism in some speculative and thinking persons ; yet such appears to have been the fact. The irksomeness of doubt has occasioned an anxiety for demonstrative evidence, upon

subjects in their nature incapable of demonstration ; and the absence of such proof as would be desirable to satisfy the thirst for certainty in knowledge, has led to a precipitate conclusion that nothing can with certainty be known. Moral evidence has been rejected as incomplete ; analogical reasoning has been questioned as inconclusive ; and the test of experience, or of experiment, has been presumptuously applied to the elucidation of subjects, to which all experience is inadequate, and all experiment is inapplicable. A literal suspension of judgment, however, does not appear to have been the result of this proceeding. The negative is presumed, though the affirmative is not disproved ; and, by a strange anomaly, the disciple of doubt becomes the champion of disbelief. Weary of uncertainty and indecision, he endeavours to fortify his system by extending it ; and having begun in diffidence, he not infrequently ends in dogmatism. He abandons the neutrality which prudence, as well as philosophical consistency, would suggest ; he urges the arguments of comparison and

analogy ~~and~~ subvert what he would not allow them to support; and he ends in actively combating the truth which at first he timidly questioned.

May not an observation of this process, and a reference to the principle I have mentioned, account for the hostility to Divine Revelation evident in some characters, not morally depraved, nor, as it appears, led to seek in infidelity, an apology for vice? Let not this argument be thought derogatory to the divine goodness. Do not suppose that I would represent such a consequence as necessarily originating in any natural tendency. I would only suggest that there may be a cause, independent of the influence of abstract conviction, for that vehemence and pertinacity of opposition with which religion is sometimes assailed, even by those who seem to have no interest in disproving her sanctions, and no inclination to disobey her precepts.

I should like here to close my letter, and postpone the conclusion of my speculation

till you tell me how far we are agreed. But as this is what you would call a question of fancy, and neither admits nor deserves much argument, I may lay the whole process of a sceptic's education before you, — at least as it is described in my imagination, — and give you the same hypothetical authority for the different conclusion which I imagine a person religiously inclined might draw from the same premises, if we suppose him furnished with equal information and intelligence, and unbiassed by a previous acquaintance with any system of revelation.

Finding himself placed in a world of uncertainty and affliction; observing that most of the events of his life, if not strictly fortuitous, are at least uncontrollable by any care or prudence of his own; feeling that the movements of his animal frame, by which life is supported, are totally independent of his will; and that he can as little command the succession of perceptions which external objects excite, and of ideas which those perceptions originate, our enquirer is reduced, in the view of such

a strange and mysterious constitution, to a gloomy and hopeless vacillation between the contending doctrines of chance and necessity ; and in endeavouring to reconcile the opposite phenomena which his own existence presents, he is bewildered in a labyrinth of doubt and despondency.

So far we may observe a similarity of mental operation, in the sceptical and in the religious, enquirer ; and perhaps we may generally trace to this source, the origin and progress of scepticism, (wherever it has existed as the result of reflection, and not as the refuge of indolence,) in the one class of men as well as in the other. But here the distinction begins. While the former, impatient of doubt, and ashamed of the humiliation of ignorance, endeavour to remove their difficulties by subjecting moral and intellectual phenomena to the test of physical experiment, they find themselves still farther involved by their enquiries, and at last reduced to the mortifying conclusion, that in knowledge, as in all other human pursuits, all is vanity. From the

discovery, that some truths cannot be proved upon their principles of demonstration, they infer that they cannot be proved at all; and what they hold to be incapable of proof, they conclude to be undeserving of credit. This severity of investigation, however; this arbitrary appliance of their own principles and illustrations, to subjects entirely unconnected and irrelevant, they are necessitated to confine within certain limits,—to acknowledge, that it is not only the interest, but the immutable nature, of man, to act, and even to think, in express contradiction to their philosophy,—and to end, with the vanity of their predecessors in science, in proposing their isoteric theory to the initiated alone.

From the regions of despondency and suspense, in which his reflections upon the contrarieties of his nature, have involved him, the enquirer, who takes religion for his polar star is extricated by a different process. The contingent nature of events, the involuntary impression of perceptions, and the almost equally involuntary succes-

sion of ideas in his mind, which seem to demonstrate him, the creature of a day, and his faculties, derived but from his animal organization, he compares and contrasts with that superior and independent power which brings these faculties within the grasp of his comprehension ; which enables him to abstract and generalize ideas suggested by sensible objects ; which extends his views to infinity, his hopes to eternity, and his ambition to perfection. He feels that all this can have no final relation to the perishable world in which he dwells, and the paltry objects with which he is conversant ; and that a creature “ of such large discourse, looking before and after,” was made for something more lofty and permanent than his present groveling pursuits and ephemeral duration. He finds this impression confirmed by the discovery, that his happiness does not consist in the gratifications of sense ; that his highest delights are those of anticipation ; and that (as an admirable moralist expresses it) the natural flights of his mind are not from

pleasure to pleasure, but from hope to hope.

Under such a view of his mental and moral capacities, how natural is the conclusion, that some more extensive theatre has been provided for their exercise ! How reasonable the anxiety which leads him to seek for some positive evidence in favour of an opinion, which he deduces from the strongest probabilities, and from the obvious analogy of the adaptation of every other creature with which he is acquainted, to its present sphere and situation ! In all his speculations, however, on this mysterious subject, with only reason and analogy for his guides, he must wander in darkness and uncertainty ; and end, like the Pagan Philosopher, with the wish that an instructor would descend from heaven.

In the book of Divine Revelation, he learns that his wish is accomplished ; that an instructor *has* descended from heaven, not only to lead him into all truth, and to

show him the path of everlasting life, but to be himself the way, and the truth, and the life ; to obtain for him the privileges which he imparts, to qualify him for the happiness which he communicates !

Of this most interesting discovery he naturally desires some proof ; and the obvious proceeding is an enquiry into the authenticity of the book in which it is contained. This question he tries by the only criterion applicable to such a case,—the rules of moral evidence. He investigates the genuineness of the record ; the date of its publication ; the proof of its reception in places where the truth or falsehood of its contents, must have been matter of public and indisputable notoriety. He observes a wide scheme of providential government traced with prophetic anticipation, and accomplished in the revolutions of the ancient world. He sees this scheme extending to the end of time, and every point in the chart of prophetic history taking its proper place, and adding its accumulative proof to the divine declaration, that the Almighty

ruleth in all the kingdoms of the earth, and giveth them to whomsoever he will. Thus satisfied of the authenticity and origin of the volume, he presumes not to measure the truths which it contains, by the standard of his own weak and limited comprehension. He receives it without exception or hesitation, and studies only to ascertain the divine meaning, that he may submit himself unreservedly to the divine will. If, in the rebellious propensities of his nature, warring against the better law of his mind, he finds some obstruction to this government of the understanding, and is tempted, in the pride of worldly wisdom and self-sufficiency, to scan the counsels of the Almighty by the rule of his own judgment, he is recalled from his presumptuous wandering, by the conviction, that his faculties are not fitted for such an investigation. He assumes the humble attitude of a disciple; and assured that in the lessons of his divine teacher he has the words of eternal life, he determines to renounce that pride of philosophy which is at variance with his best and truest wisdom.

Such, I conclude, might be the process of an intelligent and unbiassed mind, in the investigations suggested by reflections upon the phenomena of its own nature. And such, I think, it would actually be, if prejudice, or vanity, or vicious inclination, did not too often obstruct the evidence of truth. I have attempted these sketches, however, of the speculative, but not immoral, infidel, and of the christian who receives the *whole* truth of his religion on rational and philosophical grounds, rather as examples to prove our natural repugnance to an absolute suspension of opinion, than as specimens of character frequently occurring, or likely to be formed under the usual process of enquiry.

In truth, the opinions of a large portion of mankind are formed from a variety of circumstances and combinations, entirely distinct from any regular and voluntary process of the understanding. The prejudices of education, the suggestions of passion, the temptations of pleasure, of ambition, or of indolence, often combine to influence our speculative views, as well as

to direct our practical conclusions. This, you will say, is a melancholy picture of the state of man in his search after truth ; and yet, it is an almost unavoidable consequence of the natural constitution of his mind, deriving all its ideas from the succession of external objects, and enabled to exert the power of abstracting and comparing, (which seems to be the distinction of the moral and intellectual principle), only in proportion to the extent and variety of that succession. The truth of this observation is acknowledged, or implied, in the respect paid to the opinions of those, who by age, or study, or travel, have enlarged the sphere of their ideas, and supplied the limitation of personal experience, with the knowledge of other times and countries ; by which, as the telescope extends the range of natural vision, and brings new worlds within reach of the eye, the understanding is enlarged to receive, and additional objects are presented to suggest, a continual succession and variety of ideas.

I anticipate your objection here, that this consequence is not universal ; and that an inveterate obtuseness of mind may render all these advantages unavailing. I admit that there may be age without experience, learning without wisdom, and travel without the accession and enlargement of ideas, which reflection and observation alone, can give ; and there may be a greater improvement of the understanding, with a much smaller share of these advantages. Such, however, must be considered as individual peculiarities, and cannot invalidate the general conclusion, that the intellectual character depends much upon external circumstances.

This is no concession to the principles of the materialist, nor any derogation from the goodness of the Deity. If the human understanding be capable of improvement, and that improvement be abundantly provided for by a supply of instruments suited to the purpose, is it not more natural and reasonable to conclude, that a portion of

man's moral responsibility consists in the proper use of those instruments, than to complain that he has not been created at the full growth of his intellect, which would in fact annihilate the utility of almost all the objects around him, and deprive him of the most delightful and innocent of human enjoyments, the gradual and perceptible acquisition of knowledge?

If the senses be the inlets to the understanding, and if certain ideas be involuntarily and invariably connected with certain external impressions, it will follow that reason must be slowly and unequally developed; and that, even with the happiest natural conformation, some advantages of local position will be necessary, to give the germ of intellect room to swell and expand itself, and to supply it with wholesome and appropriate nourishment. If the perceptions in which our ideas originate, must be communicated from without, it would appear that there is a certain sort of necessity attending our first impressions,

which renders them not a matter of choice, but of prejudice; and that we cannot be competent to form a rational opinion, or to exercise the powers of deliberation and selection, till experience has enabled us to combine and compare our ideas, and habits of reflection and association have been formed, which serve as resting points in the rapidity of a kind of compulsory progress. From hence, my dear friend, I would deduce a remark, (not new, I confess, but apposite to our present purpose,) of the admirable adaptation of Christianity to the intellectual, as well as to the moral necessities of man; and the suitableness of the evidence on which it is founded, to the principles of experience from which his judgment must be formed.

Various and convincing as this evidence is, in its more general character, it appears to me, that the historical argument, so admirably enforced and illustrated by Dr. Chalmers, is (except the prophetic, which is a branch of it,) the only one

capable of a perpetual and universal application. And even if it were admitted generally, that a knowledge of facts long past,—of supernatural facts especially,—could not be secured by the transmission of a written testimony, we have here the corroborative evidence of facts still daily accumulating, and detailed in the Sacred Books with minute anticipation. We are not left to those facts alone, of which we can judge by the strength of historical evidence, but we are enabled to measure the fidelity of the history, by the evidence of predicted facts occurring under our own observation. And even where the fact and the prediction are equally matter of historical record, which must often be the case in an ancient and progressive dispensation, we have still the argument of analogy in our present observation and experience.

But it is in its adaptation to all the varieties of the intellectual character, that Christianity is truly valuable, in this world

of variety. If it were merely a philosophical theory, or a system of rational ethics,—or if its mysteries were to be proved, and its sanctions enforced, only by reasonings on the possibility of the one, or the fitness of the other, it is evident that such proof would be beyond the understandings of the great mass of mankind ; and that, in fact, authority must be admitted as the ground of opinions, when there is neither leisure nor ability for investigation and study. Even in the demonstrative sciences much must be taken upon trust, by persons who apply them to the common purposes of life ; not because there is any uncertainty in those sciences, but because it is easier to observe results, than to examine premises ; to admit the theorem upon the evidence of sense, than to follow the scientific process by which it is demonstrated.

It is the disadvantage of all metaphysical reasonings on the nature and evidence of spiritual existences, that they can never rise higher than probability ; and the com-

plaint of the heathen philosopher, that the more he considered the nature of the Deity, the less he could comprehend it, has probably occurred to all, who, on the strength of their own understandings, have engaged in similar enquiries. Though the Apostle's assertion be true, that, in giving us rain and fruitful seasons, God has not left himself without natural witness, it is equally true, and asserted by the same authority, that "the world by wisdom knew not God;"—that the human mind, at its point of highest improvement, lost itself in wild and extravagant speculations, framed systems inconsistent with the moral perfections of the Deity, or sunk into a gloomy and restless scepticism, equally destructive of happiness and of virtue.

A religion of abstract ideas and dry propositions, is neither congenial to the affections of man, nor communicable by general evidence, to his understanding: nor would it be possible, on the basis of such a religion, to construct a system of

moral obligations, consistent in its principle, and efficient in its sanctions. The sense of responsibility resulting from truths which it requires a long process of reasoning to prove, must be proportioned, not so much to the evidence of those truths, as to the capacity of him to whom they are presented; and the uncertainty inseparable from the hypothetical character of all metaphysical speculations, must necessarily accompany the moral deductions which have only such speculations for their principle. There is also a feeling of independence and superiority inseparable from the idea of self-derived knowledge, (as the discoveries of what is styled natural religion, may in some sort be called,) which revolts from the acknowledgement of duties and obligations, attested by no extraneous evidence, and enforced by no superior authority. It is not from the abstract attributes of the Deity, but from the influence of those attributes upon man, that his moral responsibility is derived. And it is only by

bringing those attributes into actual contact and connection with himself, by making them, as it were, visible, and tangible, by impressing them on his senses, and familiarizing them to his affections, that he learns to deduce, with irresistible conviction, a view of his duties and his destination.

The Christian religion, then, as a religion of facts, possesses this double advantage ; it supplies the only motives which are universally operative, and it is capable of the only evidence which is universally intelligible. “ In the facts of the Christian history, the high and abstract attributes of the Deity are brought down to our conceptions, in a manner the most familiar and impressive * ;” adapted to our feelings, and appropriated to our necessities ; naturalized and affiliated in the character of the great Immanuel, with the species whose

* Dr. Chalmers.

form he condescended to wear. The glory of that light which no man can approach unto, beams from the Sun of Righteousness, with a tempered and mitigated radiance; the severity of that virtue which no man can imitate, as it subsists in infinite and incomprehensible Deity, is softened in the character of God incarnate, to the tenderness of human sympathy, and invested with every endearing and imitable property that identity of nature and of feeling, can give. The tear of friendship, and the groan of bodily suffering, vindicate the indulgence of natural sensibilities, which a proud philosophy would endeavour to annihilate; while the exercise of invariable vigilance and self-command, founded upon a reference to higher motives and objects, points to the true and legitimate use of every faculty and feeling; and proves, that it is in the government, not in the extinction of his affections, that man's true virtue and happiness consist.

In thus referring to authority as the

ground of religious belief, and concentrating the proof of Revelation, to the single point of historical testimony, I would merely suggest to your observation, that the same principles of belief and acquiescence, which are here objected to by sceptics as uncertain and insufficient, are, in fact, as to the great mass of mankind, all that can be attained even upon subjects capable of direct and demonstrative evidence; and that consequently, in a matter of universal concern, a species of proof cannot be necessary, which cannot be universally communicated and received.

There is indeed a moral certainty, analogous to that of scientific induction, of which the Christian Revelation is eminently, and perhaps exclusively, capable. There is a collateral and cumulative evidence in the earliest records of uninspired history; in the predictions successively accomplished; in those even now in their course of accomplishment; in the geological phenomena, which, if they do not fix the

period of the Deluge, render it impossible to question the fact, and equally impossible to attribute it to any agency similar to the present operations of nature ; and, above all, in the striking and stupendous truth, that this Revelation alone enters with deep and intimate inquisition, into the true history and character of Man ; alone traces the origin of that moral depravation, which has mortified the pride of reason, and baffled the speculations of philosophy ; alone suggests a remedy, effectual in all cases, attainable by all capacities, suited to all the varieties of the disease, and capable of the nicest adaptation to the circumstances of every patient. An examination of these various proofs will abundantly exercise the talents, and reward the industry, of the scholar ; but does not surely diminish the value of that more simple and general evidence, which is intelligible to all, and suited to those principles that influence the judgment, in the common concerns of life.

If you admit the truth of this observ-

ation, it is at once a reply to the objection, founded upon the incapacity of the great mass of mankind to understand the complicated evidence of Revelation. And it is an additional argument of the goodness and wisdom of God, that he has graciously furnished us with proof, adapted to all the varieties of intellectual capacity which he has formed.

“ But what has all this to do with religious party, and religious charity, the subject with which you set out? ”—A fair question:—and perhaps I might best defend myself, by pleading the habit of digression, which has so often tried your patience. There is, however, in my mind, a connection, which makes these observations not irrelevant to the object of our correspondence. The charity and diffidence for which I would plead, are applicable only to the differences of those who alike acknowledge the authority of Revelation, while they variously interpret its meaning. But charity requires no compromise of truth,

and modesty involves no concession to infidelity. It is, therefore, not amiss to mark this distinction clearly, and to premise, that you are never to understand any of my emollient and qualifying observations, as applicable to those who question the truth, or reject the morals, of the Gospel.

Adieu !

LETTER II.

NECESSITY OF DECISION IN RELIGIOUS PROFESSION.

RELIGIOUS CONTROVERSY GENERALLY INJURIOUS TO CHARITY.—EARNEST IN PROPORTION TO THE SUPPOSED IMPORTANCE OF ITS OBJECT.—EARNESTNESS IN DEFENCE OF RELIGION LAUDABLE.—IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION TO SOCIETY.—PARTICULARLY AS A STANDARD OF MORALS.—UNCERTAINTY OF MORAL SCIENCE WITHOUT IT.—PRUDENCE OF SUPPORTING RELIGION UPON THESE CONSIDERATIONS.—DUTY OF SUPPORTING IT UPON CHRISTIAN PRINCIPLES.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

AFTER the distinction in the close of my last, you will not be surprised to find me, not only the apologist, but the zealous advocate, of polemical earnestness, in one line at least of religious controversy, the general defence of the principles and practice of religion.

It is a common, and, in some respects, a just, objection to religious controversy,

strictly so called, that it contracts the charity, sours the temper, and leads the disputant insensibly to substitute peculiar modifications for fundamental principles. Hence has arisen an acrimony of debate within the bosom of the Christian church, which has done more to prejudice those who are without, and to obstruct the success and circulation of the Gospel, than all the opposition of infidelity, or all the obstacles of local or accidental impediment. A neglect of the distinction which the Scripture itself presents, between questions of faith, and questions of opinion, (the one class to be admitted on the testimony of God, the other to be argued on the principles of reason,) has sometimes occasioned dissension, where there was little essential difference, and has given an importance to the questions in dispute, which has necessarily produced a proportionate earnestness in the style of discussion.

This earnestness, which will of course increase in proportion to the supposed

importance of the point in question, and to the view which its advocate entertains of its scriptural authority or practical influence, may be assigned as a cause, and, under some limitations, may be admitted as an apology, for the vehemence sometimes exhibited in support of those distinctions of religious opinion, which divide the Church of Christ into separate classes.

But, for earnestness in the maintenance of religion itself, — for zeal in the enforcement of its evidence, — for energy in the inculcation of its great and fundamental principles, — and activity in the diffusion of its moral influence, whether as it relates to this world or the next, no such apology is necessary. Upon a subject which by general acknowledgment, involves the most important moral consequences to society, and, in the believer's estimation, extends its influence to another state of existence, it is not to be expected, — and surely, it is not to be desired, — that the same indifference should be felt, or the same coolness

manifested, as on common points of controversy or criticism.

The zeal and vehemence, therefore, which have sometimes been observed to distinguish theological controversy, and which have been most unjustly and uncharitably supposed to attach peculiarly to the theological character, may be traced to a source more creditable to religion and human nature, than the enemies of religion are disposed to admit; and the earnestness with which the Christian contends for what he holds to be the faith once delivered to the saints, should not lightly be attributed to selfish or unworthy motives. If professional interests be supposed to have led him into such discussions, he is also entitled to the credit which on other subjects is conceded to professional knowledge. If his devotion to religious studies and pursuits be the result of choice and conviction, independent of any personal engagement, it is to be expected, that what he feels deeply, he will express strongly, — that he

will not compromise principles which he believes to be the basis of all true virtue in this world, and of all hope in the next, for the paltry praise of a spurious liberality, — that he will not hesitate to avow in the first of all sciences, that honest enthusiasm, which is the praise of genius, and the principle of improvement, in every other science, — that he will not be “ashamed the Gospel of Christ,” which he holds to be “the power of God unto salvation, to every one that believeth.”

The importance of religion to the interests of society, may be inferred from the general consent with which legislators in all ages, have adopted it as the sanction and foundation of moral and political institutions. However traditionary corruption may have obscured the truth of revelation, or whatever differences of opinion may have existed as to the morality of specific modes of conduct, all ages and nations appear to have agreed in the admission, that society cannot exist without religion. From the complicated mythology of

pagan antiquity, to the barbarous idolatry of the savage tribe of our own days, the doctrine of responsibility, though grievously perverted, seems to have been almost universally acknowledged, and to have formed the sanction, if not the basis, of those institutions in which individual interest and inclination are sacrificed to the general advantage. This relick of ancient truth we may trace where all others are obliterated; and however it may have been abused in its application to the support of human establishments, or to the schemes of human ambition, the universality of its adoption proves its universal existence as a principle in the mind, and its efficacy as a corrective and restraining power in cases beyond the reach of external regulation.

If this observation be allowed in cases where the light of nature, or of tradition, is obscured by innumerable corruptions, how much more strongly will it apply where the principles of morals are fixed by

express revelation; where the conscience is not left to the vague direction of abstract theory or subtile disquisition; where the rules of virtue are enforced and illustrated by divine authority and example; and every possible contingency is provided for, by express precept or general premonition.

There is no point on which the advocate of Christianity, may more securely rest his proof of its important influence on society, than the incontrovertible fact, that, with all the light which divine revelation communicates to the investigator of moral truth, he cannot for a moment lose sight of the leading doctrines and authoritative sanctions of the Gospel, without opening his subject to innumerable questions and difficulties; and rendering it liable to perpetual exceptions, which seem rather calculated to adapt the rule to each particular case, than to regulate all cases by the rule. The universal and uncompromising standard of Gospel morality, is, indeed, the only one which appears incapable of per-

version by self interest, or of mis-apprehension through preconceived opinions. The student in this school, is directed to seek the foundation of his system, not in relations and analogies of man's discovery and device, but in the counsels of unerring wisdom, and the dispensations of impartial justice. He is taught to look, not primarily to his own interest, and remotely to that of the little community around him, either of which may be inconsistent with the other, and both hostile to that of the world at large ; but, to extend his views to a scheme, in which all local and temporary interests are merged in those which are universal and eternal. Merged, not by the annihilation of personal or social feelings and partialities ; not by the inculcation of a spurious philanthropy which would paralyse all affections and neutralize all obligations ; not by the nice and scrupulous calculation of the comparative weight of contending principles ; but by the broad and simple truths, that man's moral responsibility is derived, not from

his own nature, but from his relation to his creator ; that the law which binds him to certain duties and obligations, emanates from an extraneous and superior authority, and, though mercifully and wisely designed for his present improvement and happiness, still points to them as objects inferior and subservient to that ultimate perfection of character, and completion of felicity, which it proposes as the end and aim of all present sacrifices and privations.

Considered as a subject open to the investigation of human reason, and depending for its improvement upon human discovery alone, moral science is perhaps of all others the most difficult, and the least capable of precise and systematic explanation. The object of relative morality, is to promote social or individual happiness ; and the questions of moral casuistry generally arise from the difficulty of reconciling private interest with public utility. The experience of all ages has too clearly proved the inefficacy of reason and

philosophy, to correct the radical selfishness of the human character ; and the universal consent, with which moralists have established their systems upon a primary and acknowledged law of nature, which necessarily supposes a supreme legislator, argues the necessity of some authoritative standard to fix the principles, and enforce the obligations, of reciprocal duty.

Such a standard is to be found in the Christian revelation alone ; a truth acknowledged by some celebrated moralists,—who admit its authority as the basis of their speculations, while it is virtually disclaimed, or neutralized, by the application of other principles, in cases supposed not to be within the scope of its decision.

If we examine the practical result of these respective systems, we shall clearly discern the superiority of that which addresses itself not merely to the understanding of man, but lays its foundation deep in his affections. We shall find, that

while the reasoning and speculating moralist is balancing between opposite probabilities, and often losing the season of action in endeavouring to adjust his principles to local or characteristic variations, the Christian moralist, under the guidance of that law to which he implicitly submits, is prompt and decided in his judgment, steady and consistent in his conduct. He acts upon principles which bind to no present expediency. He judges the rectitude of every action, by a clear and definite standard, — the revealed will of God. He admits no palliation nor exception, where he finds none in his record. He applies the same rule of duty to himself in the highest station, which he proposes to his fellow creature in the lowest ; and respects those rights in the humblest of his brethren, which he holds to be derived, not from human compact or convenience, but from the infinite wisdom and impartial justice of God. For every exertion, he has a motive. For every duty, he has a test. He loves, because he has been loved. He forgives,

because he hopes to be forgiven. If rich, he is merciful, as his Heavenly Father is merciful ; if poor and afflicted, he patiently bears the cross, and contentedly treads the path that his Saviour has trod before him. If assaulted by temptation, he weighs not the present advantage or indulgence, in the balance, against any worldly interest or feeling, but firmly replies to the treacherous suggestion, “ How shall I do this great wickedness, and sin against God”? In every rank and relation of life, in every variety of external circumstance and situation, he has a clear and specific direction for his conduct. In the command to love his neighbour as himself, he has a general rule of social duty, which no sophistry can prevent or evade. In the intimation, that without inward purity of heart, all outward morality is vain as to himself, however useful it may be to society, he is provided with the true principle, and the infallible test, of virtue ; and in the indifference to public applause, which the Gospel inculcates, he is taught the grand secret of that independence and

equanimity of mind, which is allowed to be the perfection of philosophy.

If such be the results, public and private, of the influence of the religious principle in society ; if from its dawn in the patriarchal days, through the growing light of succeeding revelations, to its meridian glory in the Gospel, it is found to be the origin of all that is true, and just, and pure, and lovely, and of good report, of all genuine virtue, of all rational praise, — shall we not confess, that, even upon present and prudential considerations, the zeal which would defend and disseminate such a principle, should no more be stigmatized with the name of enthusiasm, than any other exertion of public spirit or patriotic energy? Shall we not perceive and own the inconsistency of strenuously urging objects of inferior moment, and principles of partial and of local influence, and deserting this broad and universal foundation of virtue, and happiness, and hope, simply because it is asserted to have its origin in a

higher authority than that of mere human speculation? Shall we not feel, that even if it were possible to suppose the principle to be destitute of clear support from revelation, and to draw its evidence only from its suitableness to the nature, and character, and circumstances of man, if such practical effects can be shown to have proceeded from it, as have never been produced by any other cause, it is the interest, nay it is the duty, of every lover of his country and of his species, not only to respect, but actively and zealously to maintain it? Shall we not acknowledge, that, if it be right and praise-worthy, to promote, by useful and benevolent exertion, the happiness and improvement of the community in which we live, it is eminently right and praise-worthy, to promote the influence of a principle, which is the basis, of all true happiness, and of all substantial improvement? Shall we not maintain, that, if zeal and firmness be honest and honorable in the defence of social rights and political privileges, they are transcendently honest and honorable

in the defence of rights the most sacred, and of privileges the most valuable ?

And if we rise from the views of prudence and policy, to those of conviction and conscience ; if we consider the Christian revelation, not merely as a scheme of moral instruction, calculated to improve the character and ameliorate the present condition of man, but as an authoritative disclosure of the will of his Creator and his Judge, and a gracious direction to the only source, of strength for present obedience, and dependence for future hope ; shall we not hold it an imperative duty, to refer to it as the basis of all moral reasoning, and the standard of all moral truth ? as the only foundation upon which true virtue can be built, and the only principle on which true happiness can be established ? Shall not those who feel and value the hopes and consolations of religion, be allowed to defend it earnestly, as the charter of their Salvation ? Shall an acquiescent and temporizing spirit be expected on this most

important of all subjects, which is not often manifested in the discussion of a popular opinion, or a philosophical dogma? Shall a zeal for God be the only zeal that is not honorable, and loyalty to the King of Kings be the only loyalty that is not fashionable? — No, my friend! If we really believe the evidence, and acknowledge the obligations of religion, we cannot be cold in the defence of that evidence, nor fearful in the enforcement of those obligations. In such a cause, timidity is desertion, and neutrality is treason. Away then with the prejudice which would brand with the reproach of bigotry and enthusiasm, the honest avowal of religious principle, and the zealous propagation of religious truth! Away with the timid inconsistency which would shrink from a profession of allegiance to the God of our Salvation, and compromise upon views of present interest or expediency, the cause of duty, and the interests of eternity? If religion be confessedly the strongest foundation of morality, let it be respected by those who hold morality

to be all that is valuable in religion. If it be received as a dispensation of grace from the Fountain of Mercy, and a passport to the glories of an eternal world, let it be avowed with a dignity proportioned to its importance, and defended with a zeal proportioned to its value. Let it be avowed, not as a speculative and optional opinion, but as an evident and authoritative principle. Let it be defended, not as a sentiment, but as a charter ; not as a system, but as a possession !

LETTER III.

NECESSITY OF DECISION IN RELIGIOUS PROFESSION.

CONSISTENCY OF RELIGION WITH REASON. — ILL EFFECT OF A JEALOUSY OF REASON IN RELIGION. — CONSEQUENT NEGLECT OF THEOLOGY. — CAPRICIOUS ASSOCIATION OF SCEPTICISM WITH SUPERIORITY OF TALENT. — SACRIFICE OF PRINCIPLE TO LITERARY CIVILITY OR VANITY. — THIS MISCHIEF MUCH ABATED. — INCREASING INFLUENCE OF RELIGION. — OBSTRUCTIONS TO THIS INFLUENCE. — CONCLUSION.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

IN an attempt to urge upon those who acknowledge the divine authority of the Gospel, the obvious duties of a decided profession, and zealous propagation of their Christian principles, it may appear superfluous to have digressed into any remarks on the consonance of these principles with those of reason and philosophy. The authoritative mandate of a master is to be obeyed, not examined; and the servant

who aspires to the praise of fidelity, presumes not to exercise his private judgment, in defiance of the authenticated will of his employer. It would seem, however, as if the apprehension which some pious persons have entertained, of a presumptuous use of reason in religious discussions, had led to the depreciation of its exercise altogether; and the apostolic cautions against wisdom and philosophy, *falsely* so called, had produced a sort of imaginary antithesis between all philosophy, and Gospel truth, between morality, and Christian holiness. From the practice of the great Apostle himself, who applies so directly to the understandings of his converts, in the enforcement of moral and doctrinal truths, we may infer that no such opposition exists; and that every collateral and corroborative light that reason and philosophy can afford, may be applied to the defence and illustration of religion, though always in suberviency to the teaching of Scripture, and in earnest prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

It was not therefore, irrelevant to show, that in contending for the great truths of Revelation, the Christian lays the best foundation of moral and rational improvement; and that the principles which the divine mandate has made it his duty to receive, open a shorter and more direct path to the perfection of his nature, than all the discipline of all the schools. A comparison of philosophy with religion, for the purposes of contrast and opposition, is not necessary to the support of a system whose praise it is to accomplish what philosophy only attempts: nor does it weaken the evidence, or derogate from the dignity of Revelation, to trace its conformity with those principles of reason which our great Creator has implanted in the human mind; and, while we acknowledge its incontestable superiority to the grasp of the highest human intellect, to observe its exquisite adaptation to the wise and merciful purposes of its all wise and all merciful author.

It has been one unfortunate consequence

of this jealousy of reasoning in matters of religion, that a sort of distinction has been established between the provinces of the theological and the general scholar ; and the noblest and most important of all sciences has been gradually excluded from the enquiry and pursuit of those students, whose inclinations or circumstances have led them to the choice of more common and secular subjects. It is also a striking and melancholy fact, that an avowal of ignorance, or at least of indifference, to this science, has been openly, and even ostentatiously, made, by persons who were anxious to be esteemed conversant with every other ; and that the laws which alone impose universal and immutable obligation, the principles which alone claim for their basis authentic and infallible truth, the ethics which alone extend their provisions to every possible variety of circumstance, and character, and profession, have been excluded from the circle of general study, of which they should ever be the centre, and referred by consent to the precarious

and conventional authority of public establishments and professional defences. It is a fact more portentous of injury to the interests of religion, than the prevalence of infidelity itself, that the ambition of literary distinction, or the admiration of literary eminence, has sometimes led the believer of the Gospel, into the disguise or disavowal of his convictions, and softened the severity of honest and manly reproof, into the bow of acquiescence and the smile of applause. It is a sad, but striking feature in the history of our theological controversies, that more deference has been shewn to the infidel who attacks the very foundations of our faith, upon pretended grounds of reason and philosophy, (neglecting the very first principle of both,—an acquaintance with the system which he professes to oppose,) than the honest and conscientious believer, who dissents on some inferior or questionable points, not without a love of truth and a zeal for religion, though perhaps without much judgment or discretion. It is a trite, but a very true observation, that the respect

which has been paid to the genius of some celebrated infidels, has given a degree of influence and currency to their opinions; and led to a capricious and groundless association of sceptical principles with superior capacity: while the contrast of public controversy with private adulation, and the reference to those truths which were the subject of controversy, as matter of manly speculation or professional discussion, has lessened their importance in the public opinion, if it has not been attended with the additional ill consequence of lessening their defenders in the public estimation.

Happily, my dear friend, the day is past, when we saw the champions of infidelity complimented by the advocates of the Gospel, and the defence of truth sacrificed to the punctilios of literary civility. The praise of acuteness, is no longer identified with scepticism, nor the boast of free enquiry, with the rejection of all moral and historical evidence. The divine science

of Christianity is no longer an insulated or occasional pursuit, to the professional, the pious, or the aged, but seems to be rapidly rising to its proper place, as the basis of all knowledge, the criterion of all truth, the principle of all virtue. If the spirit of infidelity be still powerful amongst us, (and powerful it must be while the enemy of all truth holds his corrupting influence upon the human mind,) it seems to have lost half its evil by appearing in its native blackness and deformity,—stripped of the artful and plausible disguises of literary or philosophical disquisition, of political theory or physical science, and boldly proclaiming itself the apologist and instigator of anarchy, treason, and murder. These are its invincible and inevitable fruits, if its power be not checked by the counteracting influence of Christian morals and Christian institutions; and in proportion as the defect of general education shall lessen the extent of this influence; while the tremendous consequences appear, in the subversion of all that

is sacred, all that is venerable, all that is dear and valuable to man, as a rational, social, and immortal being.

It is a consequence, and a most comfortable proof, of the increasing influence of religion, that it is no longer considered merely as a professional study, but is raised to a high and prominent place in the scale of general information. Its advocates are to be found in the senate, and at the bar, as well as in the pulpit and theological chair, and it seems to be pretty generally understood, that what is confessedly a matter of universal concern, ought to be a matter of universal solicitude and enquiry.

This cannot, however, supersede the necessity, or invalidate the authority, of the professional defenders and expositors of religion ; who perhaps alone are competent, from their habits and education, to the discussion of nice or critical questions, and the discovery of those latent harmonies and analogies which obviate all objections of

discrepancy in the sacred writings,—whether in pursuing the alternate promulgation of different, but not conflicting, doctrines; or in tracing the simple and unstudied relation of facts, distinct, but not inconsistent. All that is critical, and (if you will allow me the expression,) casuistical, in religion, it requires indispensably the aid of much collateral study, either to understand or to elucidate; but all that is personal and practical, is as simple and intelligible in expression, as it is authoritative and universal in application. It is indeed an obvious, and perhaps an unavoidable, inconvenience, that a spirit of presumption and controversy may sometimes be generated by unrestrained enquiry, and a dogmatical zeal for speculative tenets, substituted for diligence in practical duties. But even such a result is better than self satisfied ignorance,—despising the duty and the doctrine alike, and riveting its grovelling attention upon the dust from which it has sprung, and to which it is doomed to return. If the apostle could rejoice that

Christ was preached, though of contention, the Christian of these latter days may rejoice that the knowledge of the Gospel is spreading in the midst of controversy and cavil, and may look forward with more hope to a recovery from the fever of misguided zeal, than from the paralysis of obstinate indifference.

It is to be lamented, however, that this growing impression of scripture truth has sometimes failed of its practical effect, as well from the prejudices with which it is associated, as from those by which it is obstructed. To the former I may have occasion to advert hereafter. Of the latter I shall now only observe, (and here I anticipate your entire concurrence,) that consequences the most injurious to true piety, must arise from that jealousy of eminent Christian attainments, which is apparent in many professing Christians, and leads to a practice almost as hostile to religion, as the efforts of infidelity itself; — I mean the practice of identifying a superior strictness

of life, and a more than ordinary attention to the offices of religion, with some error of principle, or deficiency of judgment, — or, if such a charge be palpably inapplicable, — a half civil, half sneering allusion to excellence of motive and eminence of piety, leaving it more than doubtful, whether the singular individual who dares to appeal to the Gospel as his sole and universal rule of action, and, upon a principle of conscience, withdraws from the amusements and society of the world, (though not from its necessary business and duties,) is not rather to be pitied for his enthusiasm, than admired for his prudence or his honesty. How far, and in what sense, this abstraction from worldly pursuits and amusements is incumbent as a branch of Christian duty, it is not the present purpose to enquire. Much must depend upon the varieties of individual character and situation. But thus much is certain, that of the two extremes, — if extremes there must be, — the one is safe, prudent, and virtuous; the other, at best, questionable in its motive, and dangerous

in its effects. It must, in fact, rest with the conscience of each individual, to determine what degree of Christian discipline is necessary to his spiritual health; and it is a most unjust and irrational proceeding to depreciate a character as unsocial and enthusiastic, which spends itself in labours for the benefit of society, and exhibits only the enthusiasm of benevolence; for I cannot apply the epithet of enthusiasm to devotion, however ardent, if it be not eccentric.

Religion is unhappily the only pursuit, in which zeal is not esteemed, where it is not participated. An anxiety to escape the disgrace of contrast, where we resolve to decline the competition, too often awakens a spirit of jealousy, which labours to reduce to its own level, the excellence it refuses to imitate. That such a spirit very widely prevails, both in public life and private society, must be obvious to all who have observed with any attention, the present state of the religious world; and it is one

of the most awful signs of the times, that this spirit is no longer confined to the sceptic and the worldling, but attains amongst numbers who would shudder at the imputation of unsoundness in doctrine, or laxity in morals. It requires, indeed, even in this Christian land, no small portion of that hope which enabled the apostle to glory in the reproach of the cross, to support the obloquy which is sometimes thrown upon the decided professors of religion ; not by an open enemy, — for then it might be borne and despised ; nor by a direct opposition to their principles, — for then it might be met and refuted ; but by a sort of civil insinuation that they go much farther, than is necessary, or possible, for persons of a more sober judgment, or less fervid imagination.

Now this seems to be the very spirit of indifference or neutrality, the condemnation of which I noticed in my first letter — a spirit really at variance, not so much with the aberrations or eccentricities of piety,

as with the very existence of piety itself,—a spirit, which leads to the relaxation of every virtuous energy, and tends to confound the great cause of vital and practical religion, with those shades and varieties of opinion on points of inferior moment, which are likely always to divide the judgment, and to exercise the charity, of Christians; till their removal to that future world where all differences shall be done away; where they shall walk by sight, as now by faith; and where, (as a great reformer has expressed it,) “the light of grace shall be exchanged for the light of glory.”

I have been thus explicit in the avowal of my own feelings and opinions on this subject, to obviate any possible misconception of the motives which may dictate the ensuing observations. In attempting to enter into an examination of the sources, or the effects, of religious prejudice, the friend of peace is so often led into remarks which may appear to verge towards latitudinarianism, that it is necessary to begin with a clear

and express acknowledgement of religious principle. This is a point which never should be compromised, and should even be more earnestly and prominently urged, when the object is to reconcile Christians to each other, to point out the evil consequences which must attend a pertinacious and controversial spirit, and to show the consistency, of firmness and decision in the assertion of the fundamental articles of our belief, with diffidence of judgment, mildness of expression, and charity of feeling, in the discussion of points less evident, or less important.

To those who do not deny the truth, or disclaim the authority of the Gospel, the duty of confessing Christ before men admits of no hesitation. The belief of Christianity is not a mere speculation, resting in itself, and producing no consequences. An assent of the mind to the evidences of religion necessarily involves a submission to its obligations. Every professing Christian, therefore, whatever be his view of disputed or difficult questions, engages him

self by the broad principle of allegiance to the great captain of his salvation ; and in this paramount obligation, he is bound to merge all petty contentions which may separate him from his brethren, and weaken their common force against their common enemy. Between the two great companies, of the servants of God, and the servants of Baal, there can be no compromise, no coalition. Every soldier in the camp of Israel is bound to the defence of the common inheritance, and the guard who deserts his post from cowardice or jealousy, is not much less culpable than him who betrays it from disaffection.

And yet, my friend, how many are there who withdraw from the Christian warfare, upon grounds as frivolous as led the factious Jews to abandon their temple to the spoiler, and to perish in its burning ruins ! How many, who, upon unimportant discrepancies of opinion, or petty jealousies of interest, or nice scrupulosities of discipline, or misinterpretation of motives which they take no pains to investigate,

waste in uncharitable and trifling contention, the strength which they are all equally bound to exert in the advancement of their master's kingdom, and turn against their brethren, the arms which were given them to resist the world and the devil! How often do we see the sword of the spirit, (the word of God,) used as an instrument of discord, and applied to the defence of opinions the most repugnant, and of doctrines the most inconsistent with each other! And how often do we feel in ourselves the propensity to use this weapon against the prejudices of our fellow Christians, and strenuously to resist the application of it to our own!

How far we are individually guilty of this offence, I believe we can hardly judge for ourselves, though it may not be so difficult to determine for others. I shall, therefore, refer my case to your decision, and pursue the subject in my next letter.

Adieu!

LETTER IV.

VARIOUS MODES OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION.

PREJUDICE. — DEFINITION OF IT. — VARIOUS SUBJECTS ON WHICH IT MAY BE ENTERTAINED. — INTELLECTUAL AND SOCIAL, — MORAL, POLITICAL, AND RELIGIOUS. — THE FORMER COMPARATIVELY HARMLESS. — SOMETIMES BENEFICIAL. — THE LATTER INJURIOUS, AND HOW. — VARIETIES OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION. — SECURITY AND PRECIPITANCE OF JUDGEMENT. — LATITUDINARIANISM. — MONOPOLY OF TRUTH. — MODERATION OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND. — PREJUDICES INCONSISTENT WITH THIS MODERATION. — PREJUDICE AS CONNECTED WITH PARTICULAR NAMES AND PRINCIPLES. — NOT TO BE CONFOUNDED WITH ACUTENESS OF RELIGIOUS FEELING. — ZEAL AND PREJUDICE DISTINCT. — PREJUDICES OF PASSION. — HOW TO BE AVOIDED.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

I PROMISED you my sentiments, such as they are, on the subject of religious prejudice ; or rather, to speak more accurately, of prejudice, as connected with the subject of religion.

As you agree with me in the sufficiency and peculiar propriety of the historical

evidence of Revelation, you will perceive, that prejudice, in a certain sense, *i. e.* an impression previous to conviction, and derived from authority alone, may be, and indeed must be, the basis of religious belief with a large proportion of mankind. The confirmation of Christian faith, by the influence of the Holy Spirit, through the peculiar privilege and evidence of the Gospel, is a doctrine which can neither be apprehended nor believed, till the mind has received this previous impression. The improvement of a speculative opinion into a practical and operative principle, is a subsequent step in the believer's progress; and an effect upon the mind, altogether distinct from an impression of the abstract truth of the history.

It is, therefore, under another definition, that we must consider prejudice as inimical to religious charity. We must view it, not merely as the adoption of any sentiment or opinion without an exercise of the judgment, but also as a general character

of mind, leading to a pertinacious attachment to our own sentiments, and a contempt for those of our neighbours; and, wherever it prevails under this character, we shall find that it is calculated to obstruct the acquisition of knowledge, and the influence of truth.

Prejudice, considered under this latter definition, injurious as it is to man both in his intellectual and spiritual pursuits, is nevertheless the almost inseparable attendant of every step of his progress through this world, and of his path to the next. In the former it weakens the desire, and diminishes the capacity, for improvement, by dwelling upon early impressions and partialities, and clinging to every old idea as to an old acquaintance: in the latter, it contracts the benevolent affections, and substitutes for the broad charity of the universal church, a jealous and exclusive attachment to some particular branch of it.

But prejudice, so far as it relates to subjects merely speculative and intellectual,

is comparatively harmless : so far as it is connected with domestic ties and social affections, it is perhaps instrumental to the happiness of life. So far as it is united with the name of our fathers, and with the country of our birth, it may be made a principle of patriotic energy, or of personal improvement. Nay, so far as it refers to the engagement of the affections in the spontaneous approbation of moral excellence and beauty, it may rise to a principle of virtue.

This abstract approbation of moral beauty has been sometimes cited as the only relick of primeval righteousness which has survived the fall ; and the capacity of forming definite ideas of a perfection which is unattainable in practice, has been adduced as a proof of the certainty of a future world where such ideas shall be realized.

Prejudice, however, in these latter senses, is rather to be considered as a bias of the affections, than as a state of the understand-

ing ; and perhaps the epithet is not quite fairly applied to feelings which seem to have their origin in the natural constitution of man, and to be essential to his well being in social and civilized life.

In subjects of merely abstract speculation, prejudice may obstruct the advancement of knowledge, without injuring the interests of virtue. But in inquiries capable of a moral application, and bearing in their result upon the principles of human action, its inevitable effect is to warp the rectitude of the judgment, to encourage self-conceit and self-deception, to modify the strictness of abstract rules, for personal use according to individual fancy, and while it will hardly touch the burthen of the law with a single finger, to lay, without scruple or charity, its whole weight upon others.

In the discussion of political questions, the influence of prejudice is obvious and universal. Nay, it is perhaps in some degree unavoidable, from the connection of such questions with personal interest. Spe-

culations, apparently the most abstract and theoretical, will take their character from the peculiar views and circumstances of the theorist; and the strongest refutation of prejudices on the one side, will be sometimes found to have proceeded from prejudice on the other. Thus, through the instrumentality of the very temper which appears the greatest obstacle to advancement in knowledge, truth may be elicited, error may be corrected, and the gracious purposes of providence fulfilled, in the improvement of man's social estate, and the gradual amelioration of his character.

It would be a curious and interesting speculation, to trace some of the instances in which good has been thus educed from evil; but it is a subject foreign to our purpose, and I have only glanced at it with a view of suggesting an additional argument of the divine superintendence.

The balance of parties and interests in a state, has been found essential to the main-

tenance of a free government; and the principle of division has been applied as the cement of social union. The influence of prejudice, here, however, is connected with personal views and objects, which render it particularly dangerous. Self-interest is identified with the support of certain measures and opinions, and the moral taste is too often found to partake of the obliquity of the judgment. If the hazard to private virtue is overbalanced by the public advantage, it is still a consideration which should lead every individual to a serious scrutiny of the ground of his opinions, and teach him that he can only secure his integrity, by endeavouring to separate himself from his subject, and to view it in the clear and unclouded light of abstract and disinterested reason. This is, it must be confessed, an Utopian scheme of political speculation: but in proportion as it is attempted, will the principle of integrity be preserved, and the rectitude of the judgment be unvitiated.

The moral influence, however, of politi-

cal prejudices, will be felt chiefly by those who are engaged in the management of political transactions. If the temptations of personal interest are strong, they are limited in their extent, and definite in their character; while they afford a clear and obvious test, by which the purity of the principle may be tried. But religious prejudice is a Proteus which assumes every disguise, and exercises its most baneful influence under the most plausible and attractive forms. It identifies itself, not with the petty views and interests of this world, but with the grand and awful concerns of eternity. It clings, as it were, to the lovely principle of piety, and invests her with the gloomy drapery of its own imaginations. It intrenches her in forms and phrases, in ceremonies and observances; in peculiarities of doctrinal expression, or practical austerity. It encourages a severity and precipitance of judgment respecting the religious attainments of others, and establishes as its criterion of orthodoxy, the adoption of some singularity of phrase, or some minor distinction of opinion. It

ascribes an authority little less than infallible to the expositions of its favourite teachers ; and while it disclaims in general all submission to human interpretations of scripture, it receives implicitly the dicta of those whom it invests with the privilege of a divine and special inspiration. It identifies, as it were, their preaching with the sacred word itself ; and brands with the reproach of blindness and carnality, all who cannot discern the things of the spirit of God through the mystical veil in which they are encompassed by the fashion of a peculiar theology. It dwells emphatically upon some genuine and essential doctrine of the Gospel, and urges it in terms subversive or contradictory of other doctrines equally genuine and essential. In its horror of systematic divinity, and fear of interpreting upon principles of collation and analogy, (principles which, it is acknowledged, may be, and have been, injudiciously applied,) it fastens upon strong and single tests, and gives an universal and pervading character to expressions which *may* have been limited in their object, and local

in their application. It pushes principles, just and scriptural in themselves, to consequences incompatible with the attributes of God, and with the whole spirit and tenor of the Gospel. It substitutes, in a word, a part of Christianity for the whole, and erects its favourite principle or practice as the standard and test of orthodoxy.

With tempers of a more light and cheerful, or of a more speculative and reasoning cast, religious prejudice insinuates itself under a different character. It identifies seriousness with severity, energy with enthusiasm, an awful and abiding sense of the Divine presence, and the things of a future world, with a morose and superstitious abstraction from all earthly interests and pursuits. It represents charity as the sum and substance of religion: *not* the long suffering, kind, confiding, charity of the Gospel, rejoicing in the truth where it is acknowledged, and labouring to diffuse it where it is unknown; but a cold, careless, indolent spirit; a punctilious abstinence from all interference in the spiritual concerns

of others, and a vague dependence upon the mercy of God, for our own ; a latitudinarian indifference to modes of worship and distinctions of principle ; an acquiescence in the state of religion as it is, with a plausible profession of leaving to the Almighty the care of accomplishing his own work, in his own time. It paints Christianity, not in its scriptural and definite character, as a message of pardon and peace to a guilty and apostate world ; a disclosure of a scheme which reason could never have devised, though reason can readily adopt it ; a religion of power and energy, communicating strength for the obedience it requires ; a religion of facts and examples, concentrating, in the character of its great High Priest, the perfection of every virtue which it inculcates ; a religion of hope and consolation, offering for the support of human infirmity, the aid of Divine mercy and strength, and for the solace of human affection, the promise of a felicity, infinite and eternal !—It paints Christianity, not in this lovely, holy, heavenly character, but in the cold and abstract form of rules and

precepts ; in the jealous and scrupulous concealment of all its spiritual strength and beauty ; in an identification with the law of nature, and the simple deductions of reason. Shocked, perhaps, at the extravagances of enthusiasm, or disgusted with the cant of imposture, it rejects the most precious and consoling doctrines of the Gospel, because they have been exaggerated by the one, or abused by the other. It disclaims the belief of spiritual influence altogether, because it has been adduced in modern times to support the claim of special and sensible inspiration. It starts at the doctrine of justification by faith, because it has been associated with a presumptuous exemption from the law of obedience. It discredits all appearances of superior sanctity of character, because such appearances may possibly be the disguise of ambition, affectation, or hypocrisy. It confounds strictness in religious practice, and zeal in the diffusion of religious knowledge, however regular in its discipline, or exact in its conformity to legal or social obligations, with disaffection to the national establish-

ment. But its jealousy of this disaffection is rather of a political, than a religious character. The establishment, as such, it values no farther than as an instrument by which civil privileges are secured, and religious extravagances are prevented. It views the religion of the state as a party principle, necessary to the support of existing laws and institutions, but only one of the various modifications in which the Deity may be worshipped, with equal truth, and with equal acceptance.

The converse of this latitudinarian prejudice, (if you will allow me an expression so antithetical,) is that which identifies the principles of its own party with the truth of the Gospel; and claims, whether upon the plea of divine guidance, or of rational investigation, the character of an exclusively scriptural church. This is, indeed, but asserting in other words the Romish doctrine of infallibility; and substituting the authority of human interpretation, for that of the sacred word itself. Perhaps those who ex-

claim most loudly against this doctrine, are not the least prone to this indirect assertion of it ; if they do not carry the principle still farther, and extend their submission to the authority even of private exposition. A just and comfortable ground of confidence may be afforded to the members of a church, by the proof of its fundamental conformity with scripture ; while in externals of human addition, they may discern the imperfection which necessarily accompanies every human institution. It is not, therefore, an argument of indifference or disaffection to the church to which we belong, to exercise a freedom of judgment upon these latter questions ; and to defend them upon principles of expediency, rather than upon those of authority ; reserving, however, the use of this liberty strictly to points upon which no scriptural decision can be adduced, or in which no inconsistency with scriptural direction and practice, can be proved.

It is the observation of a pious writer.

that if the circumstantials of religion be disregarded, the essentials will soon be forgotten. An association for the maintenance of such circumstantials, as means by which the spirit of religion is to be preserved, seems to be the principle of every visible church ; and in proportion as these means are adapted to the end, does the character of any particular church approach to the apostolic model. That all things should be done in order, — that the offices of Christian worship should be subjected to a certain discipline and rule, — and that the sacraments ordained by our Blessed Lord should form the indispensable basis of every Christian ritual, — are principles maintained by all but those who reject external ordinances altogether. Upon these general and temperate principles, our reformers seem to have rested, in the definition of the “ visible church ” given in the nineteenth article. In discarding the corruptions of popery, these excellent Fathers were careful to retain all that was scriptural, all that was venerable, all that was innocent,

in the church from which they separated. Taking the Bible for their rule, and the primitive Church for their model, they raised upon the basis of Divine Truth, the beautiful fabric of the National Worship, maintaining clearly, however, the distinctions of positive and conventional authority, in the articles which respectively treat of doctrine and discipline ; referring for the former, to the decision of Scripture alone, and regulating the latter, according to the variations of local circumstance and character ; “ the diversities of countries, times, and men’s manners.” Still the provision is express, that “ nothing be ordained contrary to God’s word ;” and that “ in rites ordained by man’s authority,” “ all things be done to edifying.” The presumptuous interposition of private judgment is condemned, and the infringement of “ traditions and ceremonies of the church,” “ not repugnant to the word of God, and ordained and approved by common authority,” is directed to be “ rebuked openly,” as “ offending the common order of the church,

hurting the authority of the magistrate, and wounding the consciences of the weak brethren.'

Here it appears that a clear criterion is established, by which the essentials and circumstantials of religion may be distinguished ; and that if the latter be in some degree arbitrary and variable, according to particular exigencies, their necessity to the maintenance of religion is admitted, and the duty of submission to institutions framed for their support, is expressly enforced.

In the exaggeration of this principle, on the one hand, and the opposition to it, on the other, in the identification of the form with the substance, or in the rejection of all legal and authoritative forms, as incompatible with the spirituality of religion, we find the operation of the prejudices to which I have adverted. In the former case, a defence of the external constitution of the church, appears to be considered as the one

thing needful, and the orders in the hierarchy are sometimes as strenuously maintained, as if they were supposed indispensable to constitute a true Christian church.

Without doubting the apostolic institution of these orders, may we not observe, that under the influence of the principle in question, the distinctions of church government appear to be estimated beyond their due proportion, when particular forms are exalted to an authority equal with that of the fundamental doctrines of our religion, and points determinable only by the evidence of ecclesiastical history, are urged as earnestly as if they could be proved by the testimony of Scripture itself.

But perhaps there is no point upon which a greater difficulty occurs, and in the decision of which, there is more danger from prejudice on the one hand, and from the fear of it on the other, than the precise degree of estimation due to the judgment of early ecclesiastical writers, in the deter-

mination of disputed questions of doctrine. I confess that you may fairly tax me with presumption, in attempting to judge how far the authority of these venerable writers ought to influence the modern student of Scripture ; yet I cannot help thinking, that their province is to guide, rather than to govern, and that if an implicit acquiescence in their views be required for any definite period, we have no good apology for withdrawing from their direction, in the subsequent ages, and certainly none for declining to adopt all their interpretations, and to obey all their precepts, so long as we admit a deference to any of them to be imperative. The most superficial reader of ecclesiastical history, cannot fail to observe, that an infusion of pagan or philosophical prejudices operated early to obstruct the pure light of the Gospel ; and the foundation of those errors from which some of the most glaring corruptions afterwards grew, may be traced to opinions avowed, and practices inculcated, by Christian writers of the first four centuries, not excepting even some of

those whose general estimation is still deservedly high in the judgment of the church.

It must indeed be confessed, that a very high degree of respect is due to these early authorities, and is inculcated upon the members of the English church : but it is inculcated expressly on the ground of their agreement with Scripture, and it is limited to those points upon which their views are confirmed by Scripture proof and warrant. The high claims, therefore, which are made in their behalf, upon the judgment of the present age, seem rather likely to provoke discussion, than to promote unanimity, and have in fact divided the opinions of some eminent members of the church, who appear not to have differed upon any other question.

It is to be feared also, that these claims have contributed to awaken the jealousy, and to alienate the minds, of others, less informed, who, justly considering their

direct access to the Scriptures, as the most valuable privilege which they owe to the Reformation, and unable to understand or to appreciate the distinction between catholic doctrines and local or characteristic prejudices, start from a species of submission which seems to ground their faith upon any other authority than that of their Bible, and look with suspicion upon every attempt to illustrate and defend religion, by the aids of human knowledge.

You will readily believe that I do not offer these remarks, from any presumption of my competency to form a right or impartial opinion upon these much controverted questions ; but in stating the impression which the tone sometimes assumed in the discussion, has made upon myself, I believe that I state the sentiments of many sincere and well disposed members of the church ; and I would thence venture to infer, that as the subjects are not asserted, or at least cannot be proved, to be of fundamental importance in religion, it were bet-

ter to allow a latitude of judgment upon such points, or at least to urge them, rather upon the grounds of expediency and evidence, than on those of authority and obligation.

It is the acknowledged tendency of extremes, to produce their opposites ; and in no case, perhaps, has this tendency been more strongly exemplified, than in discussions upon the principles of church government, and the privileges of private interpretation. High and authoritative claims on the one hand, have led to a spirit of resistance on the other. The respect due to primitive, and even apostolic institutions, if it has been sometimes enforced upon the ground of scriptural and perpetual obligation, has been withheld under the profession of resisting the encroachments of ecclesiastical ambition. The deference due to the luminaries of the brighter periods of the Church, if it was once exaggerated to an equalization of their authority, with that of

the Divine Word itself, has been subsequently replaced by a spirit of free and critical investigation in religion; which, while it refers to the Holy Scripture as its authoritative and invariable standard, is perhaps the best guardian of the doctrinal purity of a Church. But when this spirit applies to "the Word of God," the jealous and familiar inquisition which it is allowable to exercise upon "the Word of Man,—" when it tries the principles of the divine government, by the parallels and analogies of human relations and institutions, — it degrades the Scripture from its place and authority as a rule of faith, and substitutes for the venerable traditions of antiquity, only the doubtful and discordant interpretations of individuals; agreeing in nothing, but the rejection of all authoritative exposition, and the real, though tacit, substitution of their own interpretation, for that of the Church, of their own doctrines, for those of the Bible. This substitution has been the source of much of the controversy which has disturbed the Church of Christ, and of

many of the prejudices which have alienated its members from each other. It has thrown into a religion of love and peace, a principle of discord and hostility; and separated those, who, worshipping the same Lord, and trusting in the same Saviour, might have "taken sweet counsel together, and walked in the House of God as Friends."

The prejudice which is associated with eminent names, has always exercised a powerful influence upon the judgment of mankind. The distinction of religious parties, by denominations derived from their respective leaders, has identified, as it were, the principle with the person; and while it has appropriated to each of our great religious reformers, certain peculiarities of doctrine and expression, (all scriptural, perhaps, and consistent, in their cautious and moderate application, but bearing the tincture of the channel through which they are transmitted, and deriving a peculiar prominence and importance from the errors they are adduced to refute,) it has

led, through a spirit of indiscriminate admiration on the one hand, and a jealousy of rivalry on the other, to the unreserved adoption of such principles, in all their exaggeration, or to the undistinguishing rejection of them, in their most limited form.

The prejudice which associates these eminent names, with the principles of which they are supposed to be the patrons, has brought into controversy some essential doctrines of Scripture, to which the zeal of defence and illustration, on the one side, has given a prominence that throws other doctrines equally important, into comparative obscurity ; while the jealousy of authority, and the fear of consequences, on the other, have, perhaps, reduced them below their due proportion. It is not, however, to the differences of opinion which have arisen upon speculative and difficult questions, that I would direct your attention, but rather to the operation of the principles from which these differences appear sometimes to be derived ; and of which it may

at least be asserted, that it disqualifies for the dispassionate consideration so necessary to freedom of judgment, and leads to the view even of general and undisputed points, chiefly in connexion with their probable or supposed bearing upon the system to which it inclines.

There is no point in which this spirit of prejudice has been more strongly exemplified, and none, perhaps, in which its influence should be more vigilantly resisted, than the propensity to identify itself with every subject of its observation; and such vigilance is the more particularly necessary, because this propensity is only the exaggerated exercise of a temper, which is the best *natural* preservative of religion: I mean that watchful jealousy of religious feeling, which detects and denounces every attack upon its faith, however varied, and however disguised. It is not, in fact, by the theological literature of a country alone, that we can fairly estimate its religious character. The public creed and the private

exposition may be orthodox : the sublime enforcement of truth, and the powerful refutation of error, may force their evidence upon the understanding of the sceptic, or the prejudices of the heretic : but such channels of conviction are open only to the speculative and thinking mind ; while the blasphemous parody, the licentious poem, may prove, by their scandalous popularity, the depravity of the general feeling ; and the poison of infidelity may insinuate itself as surely, and perhaps as fatally, in the imposing and unsuspected vehicle of interesting history or scientific disquisition. Religion cannot be said to have taken its right hold upon the mind, until it becomes not only a question of opinion, but of feeling ; and the sensitive jealousy that is ever awake to detect infidelity in all its disguises, is not the result of prejudice, but of prudence ; — if we may apply an epithet so tame, to a principle connected with the defence of all that contributes to our happiness in this world, and constitutes our hope in the next.

If this jealousy of feeling is beneficial, when connected with the general evidences, and principles, and consolations of religion; with the authenticity and inestimable value of the Gospel itself; and with our conviction of the scriptural fidelity of the church to which we belong, it is proportionally injurious when identified with minute and external variations, with points of criticism and peculiarities of expression, with decision upon questions which the Scripture has left undecided, and the peremptory interpretation, of what it has pleased the Spirit of God to leave unexplained.

But while I would guard against the error of identifying the forms with the substance of religion, I would not underrate the importance of sacred criticism, nor urge an indifference to religious distinctions, under the character of liberality. The value of every religious institution, is to be tried by its conformity with Scripture: and if the Church of England be, (as we firmly believe that she is,) pre-eminent in this con-

formity, it is not to be attributed to prejudice, in her members, that they are zealous for her doctrines and careful of her interests. It is only when they would identify those doctrines with certain forms of expression, or connect them with other doctrines more recondite and obscure,—and when they would combine those interests inseparably and universally, with circumstantialia, which from their nature must be variable and local,—that the influence of prejudice appears to operate, and to abridge the charity of the Church, as well as to obstruct the progress of the Gospel.

In questions closely connected with personal interest and feeling, it is necessary to guard, not only against the prejudices of opinion, but against the prejudices of passion; to enquire what might be our own view of such questions, if we were placed in the circumstances of those whose views we oppose; and to distinguish, by the application of such a test, the conviction produced by the abstract influence of

truth, from the impressions formed by education, by interest, by habit, and by early associations and attachments.

It is true, that in pursuing this humiliating enquiry, we shall see so much cause to allow for the prejudices of others, and to suspect our own, that without the establishment of some first principle, as a cardinal point by which to direct our course, we shall be in danger of sinking into a general scepticism ; and attributing, not only the diversities of religion, but the existence of religion itself, to the diversities of local circumstance and character. Such a principle, we find in the authenticity and integrity of Scripture. If our conviction upon these points, be once established, the authority of Scripture, as a rule to direct our faith, and a standard to regulate our judgement, follows as a necessary consequence.

Here, then, the enquirer must fix his foot, as upon the rock of his salvation ; and

however he may defend his position, with the parapets and enclosures of human ordinances and establishments, he must be careful to distinguish the post which he so anxiously guards, from the instruments with which he guards it. He must be careful to distinguish the essentials, from the circumstantial, of religion ; and, while he holds the latter in their due subordination, as means and instruments, he must maintain their general lawfulness and use, and may very justly urge their preferableness under some particular forms, upon the evidence of scriptural usage and example.

And here, my dear friend, we will suspend our disquisition for the present. I shall be happy, if these slight remarks contribute in any degree to your pleasure or information ; and will continue them, if you desire it. The discussion will not be without advantage to us both, if we pursue it in the spirit of self-application ; but we must always remember, that no benefit is

to be derived from observing the prejudices of others, if we do not learn from them to examine and to correct our own.

Yours, my dear friend,
most faithfully.

LETTER V.

VARIOUS MODES OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION.

INFLUENCE OF PREJUDICE IN GENERAL LITERATURE. — THIS INFLUENCE INJURIOUS TO CHRISTIANITY. — SUCCESSFULLY RESISTED BY CHRISTIAN WRITERS. — PREJUDICES WHICH SEPARATE CHRISTIANS OF THE SAME CHURCH. — PERSONAL PREJUDICE; WHERE OBVIOUS. — NECESSITY OF SELF-EXAMINATION. — PREJUDICE SOMETIMES MORE INGENUOUS AND RESPECTABLE; BUT DANGEROUS, AS LEADING TO UNCHARITABLE JUDGMENT. — PREJUDICE OF INTEREST. — PREJUDICE OF FEELING. — MUTUAL ESTRANGEMENT ARISING FROM THESE CAUSES.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

HOWEVER powerful may be the operation of prejudice, in the formation of individual character, or its influence upon the judgment, in the discussion of questions obviously and immediately affecting the interests of morality and religion, it is sometimes more powerful, and perhaps more important, in the investigation of

points which may appear to have little direct connection with these objects.

Perhaps there never was a time when questions of each of these classes were agitated with more warmth, and presented under a greater variety of aspect, than the period in which we live. From the pertinacity of scepticism, from the variety of intellectual acuteness, and, it may be, from the affectation of a superiority to prejudice, (the most dangerous of all the disguises which this pernicious principle has ever assumed,) many questions apparently only of critical curiosity or professional interest, have been drawn into prominent and general discussion; have been connected with subjects the most remote, and made to assume a bearing and importance quite distinct from their original character. Every truth which religion reveals, and common sense confirms, has been brought to the test of metaphysical scrutiny, and anatomical dissection. Matter has been annihilated, on the one hand, and mind has

been materialized, on the other. The consciousness of personal identity, at once the distinction of the thinking principle in man, and the proof of its unity and immateriality, has been omitted in the enumeration of the phenomena of human existence ; and the principle of religious responsibility, the best preservative of virtue, and the only restraint upon vice, in the numerous cases which no provisions of human law can reach, has been virtually, if not expressly, annihilated, by theories which in their consequences, would degrade man from his rank in the scale of creation, and reduce his condition to a level with that of the “beasts that perish.”

The prejudice, however, which, under the imposing disguise of philosophical or physical inquiry, would establish its theories of doubt or of desperation, upon the ruin of all man's future hopes of happiness, and all his present incitements to virtue, does not come within the scope of our proposed observations. Happily, it has been encoun-

tered in all its varied forms ; and (as it has sometimes occurred in the natural world,) the antidote has been drawn from the very source which appears to have furnished the poison. The discoveries of science have served but to confirm the evidence of Revelation, respecting the early history of our globe, and the truth of Christianity has been irresistibly established, on the very ground which was most vehemently assaulted,—the ground of historical testimony.

It is not, therefore, to the prejudices which obstruct the reception of Christianity, but rather to those which separate Christians from each other, that I would direct your attention. I do not allude to the local circumstances which divide Christians into distinct societies, nor to the variations of discipline, nor even to the modifications of doctrine, which may distinguish these different societies from each other : I allude rather to those differences and jealousies, whether of interest, of feeling, or even of

principle, which divide the members of the same church, amongst themselves.

It may appear to suggest a very degrading view of the human character, if I venture to observe, that considerations in some degree personal, may be traced as the foundation of particular prejudices, even where there is much sincerity, and perhaps an unsuspicious and unquestioned belief that such prejudices have been adopted as right and legitimate principles, and on the ground of their intrinsic evidence alone. In cases where the influence of personal interest can be traced, where the principle is identified with the credit of a party, or the emoluments of a profession, it is very probable that such influence will often be felt, and it is very certain that it will always be imputed; but this source of prejudice is so obvious, and is so often discussed by those whose prejudices have a different origin, that it is likely few can think deeply on the subject, without admitting, or at least feeling, its latent influence upon themselves.

This feeling, however, though it should always lead us carefully to investigate the ground of our opinions, should not operate so far, as to raise a counter prejudice against a just and reasonable opinion, because it happens to coincide with those early impressions and personal predilections, against which we are endeavouring to guard. The abstract truth of the proposition, is a question distinct altogether from the views which may influence our apprehension of it; and it is the proceeding of a fair and candid enquirer, not only to suspect the conclusions to which his judgment may be led by peculiar prepossessions and interests, but to suspect, as it were, those very suspicions, and to beware, lest in his anxiety to avoid prejudice, on the one hand, he falls into it, on the other. It may perhaps be added, that such a consequence is particularly to be apprehended by minds of a free and inquisitive character; and that the anxious desire to resist prepossessions which may obstruct their search after truth, may lead persons of this temper, sometimes to

confound the very truth which they are seeking, with the prejudice which they are labouring to avoid.

There is something soothing to the ingenuous pride of a virtuous character, (if we may employ such terms in a Christian acceptance,) in the very idea of preferring virtue to interest : and there is a consequent bias in such characters, in favour of those views, even of indifferent points, which appear least reconcileable with interested or worldly principles. This energy of virtuous feeling is indeed an excellent guide in cases of moral casuistry, and is, perhaps, where the influence of specific precept does not directly apply, the safest criterion to which we can resort. But in questions of mere speculation, or even in more practical cases abstracted from any direct bearing upon our conduct individually, we may be led to apply this criterion too severely to others, whose genuine principles we have no means of ascertaining, and whose apparent circumstances and engagements may subject them

to the imputation of interested and secular views, even when they are influenced by a sincere and conscientious desire to maintain what they honestly believe to be the truth.

This is a propensity to which those persons are peculiarly liable, who have separated themselves from the religious establishment of their country. However pure and conscientious may have been the motives upon which such separation first took place, these motives, strictly speaking, can have actuated the original separatists alone: with their descendants, whatever be the strength of their rational or scriptural argument in favour of the ground of secession, it becomes, to a certain extent, a question of prejudice; and a pious attachment to the memory of their fathers, naturally leads to a preference of their principles, and a jealousy of those of their opponents. In discussion upon the lawfulness of ecclesiastical establishments especially, and the principles of ecclesiastical government, it is to be appre-

hended, that as much prepossession may exist in this quarter, from the sense of present exclusion, and the soreness of long past oppression, as in the other, from the tenaciousness of power, or the zeal of hereditary attachment.

It is not the object of these observations, to undermine the evidence of any true principle; or to question the usefulness of occasional controversy, to elicit truth, and expose error, even in matter not of primary importance. I offer them merely with a view to suggest the propriety of diffidence, as well as of charity, in the study of controversial questions, — and the possibility, that where so strict an analysis is necessary to distinguish prejudice from conviction, the one may sometimes be mistaken for the other, or both may be so united in the mind, as to render their complete separation, an object beyond the power of human reason to accomplish.

To the jealousies of interest, (as I have

ventured to call them, but not in any offensive application,) which separate the members of the same church amongst themselves, most of the preceding observations will apply. But perhaps here an increased vigilance is necessary; as the motives of jealousy are more likely to be personal, where professional emulation and interest may be added to polemical zeal, and where all professing to follow the same rule, in discipline, and to refer to the same standard of doctrine, are equally precluded from the more abstract questions of controversy. Here the difficulty seems to rest upon the right of private interpretation, which both parties equally exercise, while the one perhaps is strenuous to impugn, and the other to assert it: but however this point may be decided, and to whatever conclusion the enquirer may come in his admission or limitation of the right, it is still a question very seriously to be weighed, how far any Christian is permitted to break the unity of the church, with which he conscientiously communicates, by the obtrusion of peculiar opinions,

upon points considered by that church, and perhaps by himself, as not essential to salvation ; and it may also be a subject for consideration, whether the infringement of established forms is allowable or prudent, when neither the order nor the energy of religious worship appear to be improved by the innovation.

Further yet ; — if such innovation, (however apparently innocent or beneficial,) be made upon the private judgment of an individual, it is obvious, that there must at once be an end, not only of uniformity, but of order and consistency, in religious worship. If in arrangements of external regulation, which are confessedly not matters of conscience, (for I speak not now of those who would innovate upon doctrinal grounds,) the judgment of individuals were not to submit to that of the society, there could be no such thing as an established church, nor any permanent or regular association for religious purposes.

In every condition of life, and upon every question which may involve a practical influence upon the conduct, there is this personality of feeling to which I have alluded. Circumstances may occasion much inequality in its operation, and a true principle of religion will do much to counteract it. But a peculiar care should be exercised at every post where there is a possibility of its encroachment ; and perhaps there is not one, upon which the Christian feels that he requires a vigilance so unremitting, as that, where, by the legal establishment of the church to which he belongs, the interests of the present world appear to entwine themselves with those of eternity.

We now come to a point, from which I should be very well pleased to escape, so much do I feel the difficulty of discussing it without yielding to the influence of the prejudice which I deprecate : I mean, a certain jealousy of feeling, by which our church is just now unhappily distinguished, and many of its most pious and exemplary

members are made, as it were, strangers to each other.

This jealousy is observable in the cold and suspicious intercourse which we are too apt to hold with those from whom we apprehend any question of our favourite doctrines, though they profess a submission as implicit as our own, to the authority which is our common standard; and it often creates a distinction, where no doctrinal difference exists, from a general propensity to make our own views and feelings, the standard of judgment for others.

The controversy with respect to the degree of compliance, with the manners, and customs, and amusements of the world, that is consistent with the Christian character, and consonant to the spirit of the Gospel, (though a question to be tried rather upon general scripture principles, than by the application of specific precepts,) has produced more of this jealousy, and mutual severity of judgment, than almost any other topic

of religious discussion. Some personal feelings, on either side, have entered into the enquiry; the decision upon it, has been made a distinction of party, and the charges of harshness and of levity have been reciprocated, while a mutual understanding would perhaps have shown, that, in many cases at least, both were groundless.

You will not suspect me of advocating in any instance, such conformity to the world, as is condemned by the Apostle: yet, as I anticipate your objection to the phrase, "compliance with the world," and your apprehension that it may be misunderstood, I must premise that I mean by it, no more than a compliance with the customs of society, in matters in themselves indifferent, and an allowance for the right of private judgment, in applying the more general precepts of Scripture to the trial of individual cases; a right which, in fact, any man can exercise only for himself, and which every Christian holds under an awful

responsibility for its modest and charitable use.

With respect to the personal application of these precepts, particularly as it relates to the subject of allowable or questionable relaxations, (upon which this jealousy of feeling has been perhaps more excited, than on points of higher importance and easier decision,) I cannot better state my own sentiments, than in the language of the excellent Mrs. Wesley, as quoted by Mr. Southey, in his life of her son. "Would you judge of the lawfulness or unlawfulness of pleasure, take this rule:—Whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, or takes off the relish of spiritual things; — in short, whatever increases the strength and authority of your body over your mind; — that thing is sin to you, however innocent it may be in itself."

The application of this rule, however, has not been always so strictly personal, as

charity and prudence would have suggested. Some have been too ready to apply it authoritatively to others; and to urge an entire coincidence of opinion and practice upon such points, as the test of Christian sincerity. Hence has arisen much of the jealousy which now unhappily divides our Church, and has broken the bonds of unity and acquaintance, between many of the worthiest of its members.

As I am aware that you are not quite satisfied with the neutral ground which I have generally taken, in our arguments upon this subject, I shall not attempt any farther discussion of it; but will state the distinction in a few words, as I apprehend it, and without presuming to decide the question of right, between the parties.

It is obvious that the two great branches into which our national Church is at present divided, (I speak here of both sexes, and of all classes), differ as much in personal discipline, and habits of life, as in

their view of particular points of doctrine. Indeed, in some cases it appears that this difference is the only line of separation. It is, (may I say it ?) from a certain intolerance upon this point, and a proneness to judge upon principles of authority, questions which can only be decided by expediency, and by reference to individual character and circumstances, that we find some more strict and serious persons shrinking from the friendship and society of those who truly admire and respect them, though they cannot be persuaded entirely to concur in points of opinion which they consider as rather prudential than religious, and on which they see no precise scriptural direction. To reject all who plead for liberty of judgment upon such points, and to place them, upon that account alone, in the class of light and worldly characters, does not surely appear to be quite consistent with the exercise, of that charity which "thinketh no evil."

The converse of this prejudice seems

to have created, in the minds of another class of persons, a strange and capricious association, of sobriety in Christian principles, and attachment to the national Church, with a free and universal adoption of the habits and manners of the world. It appears in this case, to be quite forgotten, that many of the peculiar restrictions for which the more serious party would contend, whether their necessity be established upon the evidence of Scripture or not, are certainly enjoined, as tending to edification, upon the authority of the Church ; and that therefore, however some may hold themselves liberated by the change of times and manners, a charge of disaffection to the Church is not applicable to those who continue to observe such restrictions.

Nothing is more likely to increase and to perpetuate this jealousy of feeling, than the habit of ascribing differences of religious sentiment, to a difference of personal character ; and of supposing, that because formalists and

enthusiasts are to be found in different classes of professing Christians, each has necessarily attached himself to the party with whom he may most freely indulge his natural temper. Under such an impression, the charges of apathy and enthusiasm, though they may have been originally applied to insulated and extreme cases, come gradually to be used as the distinction of whole classes; and ground is perhaps afforded for both, by the fear entertained by each of the parties, of incurring the imputation attached to the other. The activity of Christian zeal is checked, on the one hand, lest it should pass the bounds of sober orthodoxy; the extravagances of enthusiasm are excused, if not defended, on the other, lest, in eradicating this weed from the human mind, the good seed of piety should be rooted out also. Surely it were better for both parties, taking the common ground on which it is their duty to meet, as Church Members and as Christians, to endeavour to come to a mutual understanding; to ascertain from the Scripture which is their

common standard, the real temper and genius of Christianity, and by the test of personal application, to judge of its influence upon themselves. By this test only, will zeal and soberness, which are perfectly compatible, and are both necessary features in the genuine Christian character, be distinguished from enthusiasm and apathy, which are perhaps the opposite extremes of its abuse. By this test, it will be seen, and in the spirit of charitable discussion, it may be mutually demonstrated, that as he does not deserve to be called an enthusiast, who believes every doctrine, and obeys every precept of his Bible, and only devotes himself more entirely to religion than is customary with the society around him, — so neither is he to be charged with indifference who holds himself bound to check the aberrations of zeal without knowledge, or to expose what he honestly believes to be a deviation from the principles of Scripture and of the Church. The best proof of Christian sincerity in both parties, is a co-operation in works of Christian benevolence ; or,

(if circumstances make this imprudent or impracticable,) a noble emulation in each, to surpass the other.

It is impossible that those, who go about doing good in their Master's name, however different may be their departments of service, should long continue to speak, or to think, evil of each other; and perhaps there never was a more beautiful exemplification of the power of Christian love and Christian principle, than in the sacrifices of local and personal prejudice, produced by the magnificent associations, which it has been the privilege of this highly-favoured country to originate.

The next branch of our subject opens so wide a field, that I must reserve it for another letter.

Adieu !

LETTER VI.

VARIOUS MODES OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION.

DISTINCTION OF PRINCIPLE. — JEALOUSY RESULTING FROM IT. — DIFFERENT EXPLICATION OF DOCTRINES EQUALLY ACKNOWLEDGED. — ARISES CHIEFLY FROM NEGLECT OF DEFINITION. — FAITH AND WORKS. — REGENERATION. — JUSTIFICATION. — SANCTIFICATION. — ARBITRARY CONNECTION OF SOME SCRIPTURE DOCTRINES. — CONSEQUENCES CHARGED TOO STRICTLY ON BOTH SIDES. — INSTRUCTION TO BE DRAWN FROM THESE DIFFERENCES. — HUMILITY. — VALUE OF SCRIPTURE. — DUTY AND NECESSITY OF CHRISTIAN UNION, AND OF CHARITABLE JUDGMENT.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

THE last distinction to which I have alluded, as separating the members of the same Church amongst themselves, I have ventured to call a distinction of principle; by which I rather mean, a different view or explication of certain doctrines of Scripture, professedly held by both parties. Here it appears, that, between individuals, the question rests again

upon the right of private judgment, and upon the import attached by each to the particular terms of explication. If these were previously so defined, as to be understood by all in the same sense, there would probably be little difference of opinion remaining; and the question would only be, (as Bishop Horsley has stated it,) in what terms a proposition in which all agree, may be best enounced.

A neglect of this preciseness of definition, appears to have been the cause of mutual misunderstanding, not only in public controversy, but in private discussion; and it is probably in this way, that much of the apparent discrepancy has arisen upon the questions of faith and works, baptismal and spiritual regeneration, justification, initial or final, and the nature and effects, symptoms and progress, of sanctification.

The doctrine of justification by faith, (the very Palladium of Protestantism, and the universal principle of all the reformed

Churches,) has been made of late years a subject of disputation, from an apprehension; in some cases, of too highly exalting, and in others from a fear of too much depreciating, the moral obedience which is acknowledged to be the necessary fruit and evidence of faith. The practical difficulty which has arisen upon this subject, of separating the idea of a meritorious claim, from that of an efficacious condition, has led many pious and humble Christians to keep moral obedience out of sight altogether; or to represent any reference to it, as a medium of salvation, as the result of pride, will-worship, and self-righteousness; the abandonment of our dependence upon the atoning blood and righteousness of Christ. This practice seems to have led others, in their zeal for the refutation of a system which appears to them to subvert the foundations of Christian morality altogether, to dwell less emphatically than perhaps is either prudent or spiritual, upon this leading doctrine of our Church, and indeed of Christianity itself. "For if a man were jus-

tified by the works of the law,"—if he could obtain salvation by his own deservings,—“then is Christ dead in vain,” and this stupendous exhibition of divine justice and mercy, a pageant without meaning, or a mystery more impenetrable than the highest solifidianism would make it.

I mean not to say that the truth of this doctrine is questioned; or even that its importance in the scheme of salvation is underrated; but that, from an anxiety perhaps to guard against abuse, a deep and experimental sense of personal demerit and dependence on Christ, is represented as implying, or producing, an indifference to personal holiness, a security of unconditional acceptance, and a neglect of the moral precepts of the Gospel. In apprehension of such a consequence, the obligation of these precepts appears to be sometimes enforced, without a sufficiently obvious reference to the only medium through which our obedience is made acceptable. This is indeed an error more frequently to be ob-

served in conversation, than in publications, on the subject of religion. No well-informed Protestant will deliberately undervalue the doctrine of justification by faith, or degrade it from its high and prominent place in the Christian system. But in hasty and unpremeditated discussion, it sometimes happens, that the truth on either side, is confounded with its abuse, and the charge of legalism, on the one hand, is retorted with that of antinomianism, on the other. Our blessed Lord's injunction, (which may be applied to speculative and practical principles as well as to ceremonies and duties,) "This ought ye to do, and not to leave the other undone," seems to have been equally forgotten by the disputants on both sides; and the "Sun of Righteousness" appears to be shorn of half his beams, by a partial and imperfect view of that glorious dispensation, in which righteousness and peace are emphatically said to have "kissed each other."

Zealous for the glory of God's grace, on

the one hand, and on the other, for the dignity of his law, these controversialists appear equally to forget the union of both, which the Christian dispensation exhibits; and pursue the discussion, till each finds himself entangled with consequences which he cannot evade, though he will not acknowledge them; while his opponent presses these consequences unmercifully, till the proposition in debate, has quite lost its original form, and has become a question of reasoning, instead of an authoritative enunciation of truth.

“Religion,” (says the venerable Bishop Bedell,) “is not logic; he that cannot give a true definition of the soul, is not for that reason, without a soul; so he that defines not faith truly, may nevertheless have true faith.” If our judgment of others, upon doctrinal points, were formed upon this humble and charitable principle,—if we would use our privilege of enquiry, for self-edification, and not for victory,—if we would allow to others the credit of that sincerity,

which we profess in our search after truth, — however we might differ in sentiment, we should agree in spirit; and holding ourselves members one of another, and looking with implicit confidence and submission to Christ our common head, we should be modest in the enforcement of our own opinions, and candid in the construction of those of our brethren.

Of all these controversies which have lately agitated the Church, that upon the subject of Baptismal Regeneration, seems to have excited the warmest discussion, and to have most widely separated the parties who embrace the respective opinions upon it. Its advocates have been accused of supporting unconditional salvation, in its most dangerous and demoralizing view, by attaching it to the mere participation of a rite, in which the recipient is commonly passive and unconscious; while its opponents have been charged with depreciating the character of the sacrament altogether, and reducing it to a form, or a nullity.

These extremes, however, appear to have been far from the contemplation of either party. And, probably, if a precise and mutual understanding of the sense in which each employed the term "Regeneration," had been established at the beginning of the controversy, there would have been little difference, and less disputation. It seems never to have been the intention of the advocates of this doctrine, to convey an impression, that baptism was the vehicle of a privilege which could not be forfeited; or which was ever more than conditional; and in this view the doctrine appears to have been held by a very large proportion of our best divines since the Reformation, (of whom I may instance Taylor and Beveridge, Barrow and Wilson, and some of a much earlier date;) who nevertheless are as earnest in exciting a subsequent change and renewal of the heart, as those who hold the lower view of the ordinance.

"Sanctification," (says the excellent Mrs. H. More,) "is not a point, but a

progress." The converse of this, may perhaps be applied to regeneration, in the sense which we suppose to be given to it by the asserters of its connection with the baptismal rite: it is not a progress, but a point. It is the implantation of a principle of spiritual life, which its Divine Author commits, in a certain degree, to the subsequent care and culture of man, and to the neglect or abuse of which, he annexes the dreadful penalty of exclusion from his spiritual kingdom. This I conceive to have been the grace understood by these Divines, as conveyed in the sacrament of baptism: communicating generally, a release from the sentence of condemnation incurred through Adam's disobedience, and a capacity for the attainment of eternal life; securing to children, who are not capable of insincerity or actual sin, the inheritance which the blood of their Redeemer has purchased; and imparting to those whose time of probation is extended, that spiritual assistance which our article defines to be "the grace of God

by Christ, preventing them, that they may have a good will, and working with them, when they have that good will."

Now this grace, freely offered to all in Christ Jesus, may be received, or it may be rejected. This Spirit, the seed and earnest of salvation, may be grieved, may be resisted, and (awful thought!) may finally be quenched. That, in the view of our church, this grace may be communicated antecedently to any perceptible operation upon the will, nay, that it is supposed to be actually so communicated, seems evident from the assertion, that the rectification of the will cannot be effected without its previous influence. The cause and the effect cannot be entirely simultaneous, and if this spirit must exist within us, antecedently to the rectification of the will, may not the precise time or mode of its communication be imperceptible to the understanding?

Whatever be the true state of the ques-

tion, it seems evident that the term "Regeneration" is not used in the same sense by both parties ; and that each of the disputants, arguing from his own definition only, charges the system of his opponent, with consequences which he does not perceive, and very naturally refuses to acknowledge.

The question respecting the period, as well as the condition, of justification, seems to have been obscured by a similar inaccuracy of definition. The doctrine of a first and a final justification, which evidently includes two distinct ideas, the promise of salvation as it regards the agent, and the accomplishment of this promise as it relates to man, who is the subject of it, has been denounced as the offspring of pride, and the root and principle of legality and self-righteousness. Whatever may be thought of the justness of this definition of the doctrine, and whether the privilege expressed by the term, be susceptible of any such distinction or not, it has had at least, so many

advocates among the most eminent members of the Church, (eminent for Christian humility and piety, as well as for theological knowledge,) that it seems but charitable to conclude, that it may in some instances have a different origin, and may even be maintained, without producing the pernicious consequences supposed to attend it. The difference, in fact, seems little more than verbal, to those who hold the conditional nature of the Gospel-covenant; and does not, in either view, impugn the primary and fundamental truth, that salvation is of grace, both in its origin and in its fruition; that the gate of righteousness is opened to us, by the free and gratuitous mercy of God, though it be still a question whether we will enter within it.

Upon the subject of sanctification, there seems to have been, (till lately,) less difference of opinion within the Church, and less discussion of those minute shades and subdivisions, which have perplexed many sincere and anxious Christians, in the study of

other Scripture doctrines. The power of the Holy Spirit to renew and purify the heart, and its effectual operation in those who earnestly pray for it, have been acknowledged by all ; and whether this operation be supposed to be progressive or instantaneous, whether the gift of Divine grace be considered as conferred as a privilege, or sought as a qualification, its necessity has been universally admitted ; its direct and personal application has been maintained ; and its effect upon the outward conduct, has been adduced as the only visible proof of its purifying influence having been received into the heart.

But though we may hope that this and other doctrines, may be safely and innocently held, with some shades of modification, we are not called upon to make the same allowance for the new view of imputed sanctification,* which has lately agitated

* It has been suggested to the writer, that the above term may be supposed by some persons to apply to the

and divided the Church. This strange opinion, (which would transfer by imputation, or substitution, the personal holiness of the Redeemer's character, to that of the believer,) manifestly tends in its consequences, not only to prevent the moral reformation which it is the distinction of Christianity to produce, but to counteract, (so far as human perversion can counteract it,) the great end and object of the Gospel dispensation; of which, personal purification was at least a conspicuous branch, and in which, it is stated as the indispensable test of meetness for the presence of God.

Yet charity dares not assert, even of this pernicious doctrine, that all who hold it are entirely hostile to the truth, or favourable to the licence which it gives to the worst

doctrine of imputed righteousness. To obviate the possibility of such an impression, the reader is referred to Mrs. H. More's *Moral Sketches*, page 361; for a concise view of the doctrine intended to be described by this epithet.

passions of human nature. But its inconsistency with the whole tenor of Scripture and particularly with the discourses of our Lord himself, must surely be evident to every unprejudiced mind ; and must lead to a conviction, of perversion in the principle, or error in the judgment, of those who maintain it. The demoralizing consequences, glaring and conspicuous as they are, afford a strong presumptive proof that it is not the doctrine of the English Church ; and if any additional argument were necessary, it would be found in the almost universal secession of the persons who hold it, from her communion.

Another practice, which seems to have contributed to awaken the jealousy that has thus divided us amongst ourselves, is, that of representing certain doctrines of the Gospel, as united by a necessary concatenation, and liable to question or mistake, if separated from each other. This is evidently true of some Scripture doctrines, though it seems to be doubtful with respect

to others. Our view of the doctrine of the atonement, for instance, must depend upon our opinion, of the state of corruption to which man was reduced by the fall ; and to our sense of the depth of this corruption, must be proportioned, the estimate we make of the value of the price paid for his recovery. This leads by direct inference, to the doctrine of our blessed Lord's divinity ; establishes a logical connection between these fundamental truths, and makes them, as it were, dependent upon each other. Accordingly, we find them always sharing the same fate, and received or rejected together.

This connection, however, is sometimes supposed to be of a much wider extent ; and is adduced in support of some positions to which it does not seem exactly to apply. " The doctrine of the Trinity," (says one writer,) " has a near connection with those of predestination and grace." The question is not, whether the latter doctrines be true in the view which the writer holds of them,

but whether they be so connected with the doctrine of the Trinity, as to form a fair and obvious link in the chains of Christian principles? If it were so, would not our orthodox defenders of the Trinity, have been led generally, if not universally, to adopt this writer's view of predestination?

A right apprehension of the doctrine of atonement, has also been connected with an admission of the high predestinarian scheme; and the doctrines of preventing grace, and of personal election, appear to have been understood by some, almost as convertible propositions. While, on the other hand, from an anxiety to vindicate the Divine impartiality, and the conditional character of the Gospel Covenant, the office of the Holy Spirit has been sometimes so lowered and generalized, as to leave little comfort or encouragement in the doctrine of spiritual influences; and a denial of man's free agency in any sense, has been imputed to some, who, though desirous to ascribe to God the *whole* praise of their salvation,

are yet as deeply conscious of their own responsibility, as the most strenuous advocates of free-will.

On both sides, consequences * have been charged with equal vehemence, and disclaimed, probably with equal sincerity ; while each has endeavoured to support its own system, not only by separating it from inferences that are injurious, but by connecting it with fundamental truths, and indispensable principles, — and sometimes by erecting into a test of genuine faith, the peculiarity in which either differs from the other.

* Though it is a fair and charitable rule, that men should not be charged with all the consequences which may follow from their opinions, when they neither draw, nor perceive, nor acknowledge them ; it does not seem necessary to extend this tenderness to principles, if they appear to lead to consequences injurious to morals or to piety. Such principles should be carefully examined, and their consequences strictly deduced, that persons who take their tenets upon trust, may perceive how far this confidence may lead them.

The obvious improvements to be drawn by the Christian, from these unhappy differences, so injurious to the progress, and destructive of the true spirit, of religion, is—humility;—a confession of the weakness of human reason, when applied to the investigation of doctrines so high and mysterious, — (doctrines of which we can have no apprehension or criterion in the researches of human learning or ingenuity, farther than as these researches contribute to elucidate the proof of their divine original), — a sense of the inestimable benefit of a Revelation, which discloses to us as much of the Divine counsels as it is necessary that we should know, for our comfort and instruction in the way of righteousness, — and a conviction of the prudence, and indeed the necessity, of endeavouring to draw our own religious opinions from that sacred source, where only we shall find pure and unadulterated truth.

Adhering honestly to Scripture, as the standard of orthodoxy, and receiving it as

“profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness,” but not for controversy or strife, we shall at once establish our own principles, and learn to meet the unavoidable differences, which unequal abilities and accidents may occasion amongst the members of the same Christian society, with the Gospel spirit of charity and peace.

We have it upon authority not to be disputed, that “a kingdom divided against itself, cannot stand.” We are enjoined, by the same authority, to “keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.” We are taught also, by the same authority, that no Christian is privileged to judge his fellow servant, — who standeth or falleth to his own master. It is particularly to be observed, that this latter restriction is applied expressly to questions of opinion, not considered as essential; and that the shades and variations of judgment which may exist upon such questions, seem rather to have been permitted, as a test of Christian virtue; a sub-

ject for mutual forbearance, an exercise for the spirit of charity and love.

It is true that our Lord, in another place, suggests a certain criterion * by which our judgment of others is to be guided ; and the consequence necessarily follows, that it is lawful to form such a judgment. But it is to be remarked, that this criterion refers to purity of practice, as illustrative of purity of heart ; and bears upon the general spirit and principle of religion, not upon peculiar and speculative distinctions. It teaches us to judge of the tree by the fruit ; to infer the motive, from the action. He alone who knoweth the hearts of all men, knows who they are, that serve him in spirit and in truth : and it is not by peculiarities of external observance, but by the frame and temper of the heart, that he will estimate the character of men. But to man, the outward action only is visible ; and it argues

a temper remote from the mild and charitable spirit of Christianity, to impute motives which we cannot authenticate, or to censure opinions which we do not understand.

Nothing is so apt to lead to this practice, in the discussion of differences of religious opinion, as the habit of viewing the truths of the Gospel, only through the medium of our own early prejudices and impressions. A deviation from the sense in which we understand a doctrine, seems to us like a denial of the doctrine itself; and we are ready harshly to question the soundness of our brother's faith altogether, "because he followeth not us."

This is not the description of any one class or society of Christians; it is the character of all: — and it is a character which will probably remain as long as the Church is militant on earth; as long as man continues a creature compounded of carnal and spiritual elements. In propor-

tion, however, as he endeavours to extend his charity beyond the bounds of his own society, will every individual approach to the spirit of the Gospel precept, “forbid him not!”—obstruct not his usefulness by questioning his motive, unless you perceive, and can demonstrate, that usefulness is not his object. You will observe, however, that this precept is entirely inapplicable to the encouragement of irregularities in religion. It is applied expressly to the performance of a good and charitable action; and the inference is immediately drawn, that none who constantly and consistently perform such actions, under the avowed influence of religious principle, will designedly pervert the truth, which they are labouring, to the best of their ability, to support and adorn.

It is not so much the difference of speculative opinions, as the spirit of reciprocal alienation from each other, which characterizes religious parties, that renders them dangerous to the established Church, and

injurious to the general interests of Christianity. This pernicious spirit sometimes diverts the attention, even of the most pious and reflecting Christians, from fundamental and important truths, and leads them to dwell upon points of inferior moment ; and to explain their own principles, or judge those of others, by certain forms and technicalities of expression, calculated rather to alarm prejudice, than to awaken conviction ; and to estimate the general orthodoxy of their fellow Christians, by their agreement or discrepancy upon some favourite question. I would not, upon so very serious a subject, suggest a light or ludicrous association ; but may we not apply to these parties in religion, the memorable sentence of the chameleon in the fable, they “ all are right, and all are wrong ? ” — Right, in the general adoption of principles which have a clear and evident foundation in Scripture ; wrong, perhaps, in the insulated and partial application, which would establish one doctrine to the

exclusion of another, or, (what is equally repugnant to truth, and destructive of Christian charity,) would charge those who hold different views of the subject, with the absolute denial of doctrines, which they only propose to reduce to their due measure and proportion, in the scheme of Revelation.

The power of this unhappy spirit, extends, however, much farther; and not only contributes to influence our judgment of persons and principles, within the scope of our actual observation, but leads to prejudices upon more general subjects, with which it may appear to have but little connection. It would involve too large an inquiry, to trace this influence in all its variety; but it may not be useless to endeavour to discover it, upon some points at this time particularly interesting, and important at all times, from their connection with the rectitude of moral and religious judgment.

Recollect, my dear ——, that I do not presume upon an exemption from prejudice, in any observations which this, or my future letters, may contain. But I can honestly plead an anxiety to judge rightly, and a sedulous endeavour to examine impartially, the foundation of my own opinions.

Adieu !

LETTER VII.

RISE AND PROGRESS OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION.

THE SUBJECT CONTINUED. — A REGULAR DISQUISITION NOT ATTEMPTED. — EVIDENCE OF THE TRUTH OF CHRISTIANITY STRENGTHENED BY ITS MORAL EFFECTS. — CONSEQUENT RESPONSIBILITY OF PROFESSORS. — FIRST CONTROVERSIES ON FUNDAMENTAL ARTICLES. — NECESSITY OF CONTROVERSY WHEN SUCH ARE ATTACKED. — SPIRIT GENERATED BY CONTROVERSIAL HABITS. — EFFECT OF THE REFORMATION IN THIS RESPECT. — MISCONSTRUCTIONS OF INFIDELITY. — APPARENT DIVISION BETWEEN CHRISTIANS INJURIOUS IN OTHER RESPECTS.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

You seem to anticipate a much more systematic disquisition upon prejudice than it was my intention to attempt; though I agree with you that the enquiry would be interesting, and, perhaps, more practical in its result, than desultory remarks on existing prejudices and disputes. As this, is, however, a plan too comprehensive either for my time or capacity, and my chief design was to investigate the subject in its

bearing upon our peculiar circumstances and duties, I will compromise the matter, by combining my plan with yours; and endeavour to exemplify the general observations, by instances in the history of the Church at different periods, or by such as our present acquaintance with the religious world, may suggest. If I sometimes seem to take a more circuitous course than is necessary, either in argument or exposition, you must recollect that it is the consequence of your own proposal.

It has been justly observed, that one of the greatest obstructions to the progress of Christianity in the world, has arisen from the degeneracy of its professors, and the manifest disagreement of their lives with its strict and holy precepts. And, independently of the divine and miraculous powers exhibited in the first promulgation of the Gospel, we have evidence, in the triumphant appeals of the early Christians, that its *moral* miracles eminently contributed to its establishment.

As long as the lives of Christian professors were a transcript of their doctrine, they triumphantly demonstrated the perfection of their law, by the excellence of its effects, referred from the rule to the practice, and proved the divine origin and influence of their faith, by its transforming efficacy. They exhibited a virtue as peculiar in its character, as it was exemplary in its degree, and emphatically marked, by the contrast of its principle with the sensualism of pagan, or the haughty self-dependence of philosophical, ethics. They laboured after perfection, not that they might triumph in the pride of human excellence, but "that they might adorn the doctrine of God their Saviour, in all things." They deposed from their usurped pre-eminence, the spurious virtues of antiquity,—too many of them the offspring of selfishness and pride,—and exhibited the genuine graces of patience, meekness, and humility; graces unknown in the heathen world, or, at least, known only to be despised as symptoms of

cowardice or folly. They changed the whole form and character of heathen morality, and promulgated a system as original in its discipline, as it was sublime in its doctrine, and beneficent in its object. They resisted all the terrors of persecution, and all the allurements of temptation ; not in the self-sufficiency of stoical virtue, but in the confidence of spiritual grace. They boasted themselves “able to do all things,” not in themselves, but “through Christ :” and they proved the value of their principles and of their hopes, by the resolute sacrifice of every other possession.

A scheme at once so original and so effective ; a scheme which, in theoretical sublimity and beauty, surpassed the highest flights of philosophical speculation, and in practical influence, transcended all that the most careful institution could accomplish ; a scheme which familiarized to general observation, in every class of life, such wonderful transformations of character, and by the substitution of one short

and simple principle, for the multifarious morality of the schools, brought down to obvious and universal application, those rules of virtue and self-government which had been laboriously, and but imperfectly, deduced from principles of reason, and expressed in the formal phraseology of science; a scheme which evinced no partialities, which allowed no exceptions; which imposed upon all, the same restrictions, and offered to all, the same incitements and rewards; a scheme exhibiting such moral effects, as philosophy had too often failed to produce even in her favourite votaries, and had never attempted to extend to society at large; a scheme, which seemed to impart, with a clear and universal criterion of duty, such a power of personal and practical application, as raised its humblest and most illiterate professors to a moral dignity which no pagan virtue could emulate — *such* a scheme, combined with such extraordinary results, would naturally suggest a presumption of its divine original: — and thus, every Christian, living in con-

formity to his profession, in the midst of a profligate and careless world, might discharge the duty of a witness and confessor for his faith, even when not called to the endurance of personal suffering, or to the resistance of positive oppression.

It was, indeed, entrenched within the rampart of her primitive and evangelical virtues, that Christianity resisted and survived the assaults of repeated persecutions ; that she stood, as it were, the firmer for such assaults, and, like an arched building, (to use the expression of a pious writer,) became the more strong and compact, by the weight which was designed to crush her.

In proportion to the result of this *inferential* evidence, in accelerating and extending the tardy progress of Christianity, may we not estimate the opposite result, from the degeneracy of its subsequent professors? Arguing from the effect to the cause, or rather from existing

facts to presumed principles, must we not acknowledge, that if the faith of many professing Christians were to be tried by their works, it would appear rather a principle of universal liberty and self-indulgence, than a system of discipline and self-control? And though this reproach is refuted by the testimony of the Gospel itself, and thrown back upon those who thus misrepresent and degrade their holy profession, it is still a dead weight upon every exertion for the farther diffusion of Christianity, and a powerful weapon in the hands of those, who would oppose its evidence, or obstruct its advancement.

Our object, however, leads only to the consideration of one source of injury to Religion; the disputatious and inquisitive spirit which has too often substituted controversy, for practice; obscured the principles of our faith, by contrarieties of explanation; and substituted the pride of polemical ingenuity, for the simplicity of Christian obedience.

The history of the early divisions of the church, exhibits a succession of those doctrinal perversions which corrupted or denied the first principles of her faith, and led to a contest, necessary, indeed, to the vindication of these principles, but unfortunate, as it violated that bond of unity which had confirmed and concentrated her strength, had rendered her respectable even to her enemies, and fenced her round with a wall of protection, which the malice of pagan persecution assaulted in vain. In the pure affection of the first Christians for each other, and their unconquerable fortitude under their sufferings for the truth, we find, upon the evidence of infidelity * itself, one of the human causes of their subsequent triumph. Yet, as if, (in providential anticipation of the objection which modern scepticism might draw from this fact,) it were designed to prove her independence of human aids and instruments, we soon after

* Julian, and, in modern times, Gibbon and others.

find this spirit of love, supplanted by the spirit of discord, and, after the lapse of a very few centuries, the sword of persecution transferred to Christian hands, and wielded, as fiercely by brother against brother, as if it had been raised in literal accomplishment of that remarkable declaration of our Lord, "I am come, not to send peace on earth, but a sword."

But, however inconsistent with the spirit of Christianity, might have been occasionally the *mode* of resistance, the *act* of resistance to these early perversions, was a measure of indispensable necessity. The opposition to those fundamental heresies which infested the first ages of the Church, was, in fact, inseparable from the promulgation of the great truths which they impugned; and the histories of these heresies, with their early refutation, prove that orthodox Christianity did not owe her triumphs to the apathy or credulity of the Christian world. The period, indeed, was yet to come, when the spirit of persecution,

that root of bitterness, transplanted from the soil of paganism, and, perhaps, indigenous in man's corrupt nature, was destined to over-run the church; the domestic war was still maintained with spiritual weapons only; and the anathema which excluded from Christian fellowship, extended not to civil rights, or personal safety. Gradually, however, the corrupting influence of power, and the spirit of vindictive retaliation, which had led some of the more vehement amongst the Christians, to retort upon the Heathen, the severities they had endured in the infancy of their religion, urged them not only to exercise the like severities against those of their brethren who innovated upon the fundamentals of the faith, but also to maintain, with a jealous pertinacity, various peculiarities of speculative opinion, upon points, indeterminable by Scripture evidence, and sometimes unconnected altogether, with Scripture truth. Even amongst Christians, equally zealous for the fundamental doctrines of the Gospel, and en-

tirely agreed in the interpretation of them, disputes upon questions of penitential discipline, or the time of celebrating the festival of Easter, with other differences of the same kind, were prosecuted as vehemently, as if the very existence of the faith had rested upon their decision. The flame of controversy once kindled, found fuel in the slightest variations of opinion; and the anathema, which, in primitive times, was directed only against obstinate infidelity and vice, was at last fulminated, even against discoveries in science, or questions of philosophical speculation.

When the chains of ecclesiastical tyranny were effectually broken at the Reformation, the spirit of disputation grew with the liberty of indulging it; and while those fundamental truths which had been so long obscured or suppressed, were established upon the clear testimony of Scripture, the zeal of recent discovery, and the habits of a dogmatical education, produced a singular combination of freedom and perempto-

riness in religious discussion, and exhibited the leaders in the great work of reform, in accordance with their personal characters, or circumstances of local situation, all harmoniously maintaining those great principles which they drew from the common source of Divine Revelation, though varying in some peculiarities of explication, and still retaining some systematic prejudices;—circumstances, which might both, perhaps, be traced to the gradual and unequal process, by which they had been awakened to discover the sophistry of the schools where they had been trained, and emancipated from the terrors of the church which they had quitted.

By that church, it has been made the reproach of the Reformation, that successive schisms have swarmed in its train; that every new question has produced a new sect; every new opinion has almost constituted a new party, and these again have been subdivided into others; till both sects and opinions have grown so numer-

ous, as to require more than the labour of a life to describe, or to understand them.

I need not, to you, expatiate on the unfairness of charging our holy Religion with those consequences which have resulted either from its perversion, or from the peculiar circumstances of its professors. Yet we cannot but observe, that while these variations and divisions amongst Protestants, have afforded to the Romanist, an argument in defence of the infallibility of his church, they have also suggested to the infidel, a practical objection to Christianity, as a system, productive of discord and contention, while professing to inculcate unanimity and peace. The discrepancies of opinion which made the respective parties, have been placed in an invidious opposition to each other, and because it is evident that all cannot be right, it has been, not very logically, concluded, that all are equally wrong. Because some zealous professors of religion have been apt to quarrel for trifles, religion has been described as a

narrower of the mind, and a principle of petty animosity. Because some speculative and curious theologians have differed in the explication of its mysterious doctrines, these doctrines have been charged with every absurdity and contradiction which either controversialist detects in the system of his opponent. The very meaning of the word *mystery* has been artfully perverted, as if it were designed to represent something not only incomprehensible, but irreconcilable to the human understanding. Faith has been described, not merely as a subjugation, but as an actual abandonment, of reason; and the sage who has successfully explored the whole circle of human science, and almost ascertained its boundaries by the extent of his researches, has been pertly represented as exhibiting the extremes of wisdom, and imbecility, in his philosophical and his religious speculations. With a strange inconsistency, theology has been supposed the only science that can be known without study, and discussed without knowledge; and the reproach of Festus

to St. Paul, has been applied by many an infidel polemic, to men, who excelled in sound and sober judgment, not less than in extent and variety of information —

Who knew enough to know
How little **can** by man, be known:
And bow'd in adoration low
Before th' Eternal Throne.

Who dared not search with curious eye
The secrets which to **God** belong,
But raised the glance of grateful joy
To the high Cross where Jesus hung.

To human sense and human pride
An emblem of disgrace and woe;
To humble **faith**, and patience tried,
A friend, than dearest friends more true.

To conscious guilt (and in what breast
Dwells not of conscious guilt the sting?)
A messenger of peace and rest
From an offended God and King.

A daysman, whose prevailing arm
The anger of Omnipotence can stay,
To penitence, rebellious nature charm,
And to eternal glory point the way.

It is not, however, in the prejudice which they excite in the sceptic, or in the plea

which they afford to the advocate of a despotic Church, that these differences have been most injurious to Religion ; but rather, in their effect of transferring the attention of serious Christians, from practice to speculation, and making that Revelation, a scheme of instruction for the head, which is intended by its Divine Author, as a rule of discipline for the heart. I do not now allude to those broad and local distinctions which mark the several portions of the reformed Church, and while they give to each its character of individuality, disturb not the general harmony of the system, nor break the bond of brotherhood between the numerous branches of the great Christian Family — the few farther remarks which I propose to make, I would limit to the case of our own Church, where our opportunities of direct information, enable us to trace more closely the nature and causes of division, and to estimate the consequences, upon grounds of stronger probability.

I shall, however, reserve this enquiry for the subject of a future letter. Though I

have not yet scribbled my usual number of pages, I will not frighten you with the introduction of new matter at the close of a third sheet, nor forfeit my best chance of a favorable reading, by too large an encroachment upon your patience.

Yours, most faithfully.

LETTER VIII.

THE QUESTION, WHENCE COME DIVISIONS? ANSWERED.

THE ENQUIRY, WHENCE COME DIVISIONS? ANSWERED BY SAINT JAMES. — INDIVIDUAL CULTIVATION OF CHARITY, THE BEST PRINCIPLE OF REFORMATION IN THIS RESPECT. — INCONSISTENCY — PRECIPITANCE — AND PARTIALITY, TOO OFTEN FOUND ON ALL SIDES. — PREJUDICES OF SEVERITY. — OF LEVITY. — THE LATTER PARTICULARLY DANGEROUS. — AND WHY? — THE INDULGENCE HERE PLEADED FOR LIMITED TO OPINION, AND FOUNDED UPON THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF UNIVERSAL FALLIBILITY. — PROBABLE CAUSES OF SOME OF OUR MINOR DISTINCTIONS.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

IN one of my former letters, I hazarded a few observations upon the nature of some of those prejudices and divisions which mark the present state of our Church. To trace their causes in a general and historical view, would be a work beyond the limits of our proposed correspondence; and would tend less to our object of self-improvement,

than that more humbling and personal enquiry, suggested by the memorable question of St. James ; — a question as applicable to the spirit of religious division, as to the more secular disputes to which it is commonly referred.

“ Whence,” indeed, “ come wars and fightings amongst us ?” Whence come those eager and endless controversies between professors of the same faith, but from that innate and deep rooted principle of depravity, which it is the object of this faith to overcome ? Whence come the mutual misapplication of principles, the uncharitable ascription of motives, the zealous contention, for disputable points, or forms of verbal explication—the presumptuous curiosity which would investigate the secret counsels of the Most High, and the equally presumptuous philosophy which would measure and proportion His attributes, by its own scanty rules and limitations—the prejudice which would identify the whole truth of Christianity, with some favorite

proposition or form, and charge with a sort of moral delinquency, every deviation from its own standard—the zeal which would transfer to the characters of men, the jealousy with which it contemplates their opinions, and maintains the contest upon abstract and speculative questions, with all the bitterness of personal animosity—whence come the various principles of discord that disturb the peace of our pure and apostolic Church,—but from the carnal and corrupt passions of mankind?

In vain, my friend, do we attempt to exculpate ourselves individually, from this general censure, if we do not cultivate earnestly and unceasingly, that spirit of charity, which “thinketh no evil.” In vain do we profess ourselves lovers of God, if we love not those, whom a common guilt has involved with us, in a common condemnation, and to whom, the infinite and impartial mercy of God, has extended the same offers of redemption. In vain do we express a zeal for their salvation, if we suspend it upon our partial judgment, and

ground this judgment, on an impious usurpation of the exclusive privilege of Omniscience, — the privilege of searching the heart. One heart alone, is open to each of us, and it is precisely the one which we least like to examine. Into our own secret faults, we take little pains to enquire ; and in the very acknowledgment of that corruption of nature, which is one of the articles of our creed, we turn for evidence, to the wickedness of the world around us, forgetful of the world of iniquity within. In our earnest disputation for the principles of the faith, we too often neglect their practical application ; contend for regeneration, with unregenerate hearts ; vindicate our baptismal privileges, while we abuse them ; acknowledge the power and the mercy of God, while we show neither fear nor love of Him, in our lives ; and formally deprecate his awful judgment, while we judge our fellow sinners, with unrelenting severity. If serious company and a strict education, have made us theoretically familiar with religion, we complacently ascribe to divine

grace, what may have arisen from the influence of habit and example; and take credit for a kind of notional piety, which, if it lead not to a practical result, will be a heavy aggravation of our responsibility. Judging the conduct and principles of others, by our own rules and prejudices, we pronounce upon the whole religious character, on a few hours acquaintance, or perhaps on the result of a short and casual conversation; and jealously exclude from our sanctuary of vital Christianity, all who are unacquainted with our favorite watch-words. If, on the other hand, we have moved in a wider circle, and mixed with less scruple in the intercourse of the world, we conceal, under the plausible disguise of charity, an indulgence, of our own faults, which we extend not to those of our stricter neighbours. Shrinking from the presumption of judging persons who are obviously careless or profane, and making in their case, a large allowance for the seductions of sin and the errors of education, we try the more serious professor of religion, by the

very strictest rules of the Gospel ; and at the same time, with a preposterous inconsistency, attribute to enthusiasm, or perhaps to hypocrisy, the conduct which we require as the result, and the evidence, of his sincerity.

Of these two modes of personal prejudice, (both inconsistent with the mild and candid spirit of Christianity,) the former, is indeed more repulsive and unamiable, but the latter, is more common and more seductive. It insinuates itself under the form of the most lovely of all the Christian virtues ; and vindicates its very breaches of charity, by the profession of a charitable motive. In persons of lively tempers and unsettled principles, it leads to all the vices which it tolerates ; while, in characters of a sterner mould, it implants all the severity attributed to religion, without its justice, its tolerance, its self-examination, and self-control.

You will smile at my hard treatment of a prejudice which you have more than once

accused me of participating ; and it may be a consciousness of my proneness to this blameable lenity of judgment, in some cases, that has led me to scrutinize it so strictly. In the opposite extreme, there is less danger; not only because there is less attraction, but because a zeal for religion, though injudicious or erroneous, is in itself less culpable, than that indifference which is too often the latent principle of a careless and indiscriminate charity.

One of the greatest practical difficulties in religion, is that of distinguishing the several virtues which it prescribes, from the specious counterfeits which are so often indulged under its sanction, and adorned with its venerable name. In making the holy law of God our supreme rule of judgment, and forming our estimate of the religious character of others, upon a strict application of this standard,—if we do not honestly and impartially bring ourselves into the same comparison, we may fancy that we are actuated by a zeal for God, but

we shall prove that we are only influenced by a morose and uncharitable temper. In pleading for the exercise of charity and toleration,—if our charity, extends to vicious practice, or our toleration, to licentious or infidel principles,—if we are led to think more lightly of the sin, by the compassion which we feel for the sinner,—or to lower our estimate of the value of our holy faith, by the allowance which we make for the prejudices of those, who reject it, or receive it in a corrupt or mutilated form,—we may triumph in the boast of our superior liberality, but we cannot boast the genuine charity of the Gospel. We cannot be of the number of those who “love the Lord,” if we do not “hate the thing that is evil;” neither can we love our brethren as we ought, if we see them posting onwards in the way of destruction, and, through a false tenderness, or a false shame, omit to warn them of the danger.

It is not here, therefore, that a Christian is called upon to exercise the spirit of mo-

desty and forbearance. . The moral precepts and obligations of the Gospel, relative, as well as personal, are absolute and unquestionable ; and no man, believing the Gospel, or professing a respect for its decisions, can plead an allowance for latitude of judgment, upon points so clearly defined and authoritatively enforced. It is rather, upon those various views of the Scripture doctrines, or variations in the view of the same doctrine, which often originate in local or incidental causes, or in some peculiar bias of the understanding, and which may be held with mutual allowance, by the truly pious of all parties, that the exercise of this spirit, becomes a Christian duty.

The present controversies within our Church, turn chiefly upon questions of this nature ; and might, (it may be hoped,) be appeased, if not decided, if each disputant, in maintaining the infallibility of Scripture, would acknowledge his own fallibility in exposition, or allow to the understanding

and integrity of his brethren, the same credit which he claims for these qualities, in himself. But this golden rule is sometimes unhappily neglected on both sides : and whether the favourite opinion be urged upon the evidence of reason, or in the confidence of spiritual illumination, we find an equal reluctance in each, to admit the instrument of proof employed by his opponent. The rationalist protests against the monopoly of inspiration, and the advocate of special inspiration declaims against the presumption of human reason ; while perhaps he does not feel that he may be employing this very same instrument, and urging the deductions of his own reason, under the persuasion that he is faithfully repeating a divine communication or suggestion.

But is the danger of presumption here confined entirely to the first of these cases? Is it not possible that this subtle and Proteus-like mischief, may insinuate itself under the very garb of humility ; and that,

in a supercilious contempt for the reasonings of an opponent, or a harsh interpretation of his motives, a spirit of self-exaltation, if not of censoriousness, may be insensibly elicited or indulged? Upon those controverted points especially, which divide the orthodox members of our Church, do we not sometimes find this recriminatory spirit?—reason and faith exhibited, as it were, at variance, and the advocate of each, represented as neglecting or despising the other?—the adoption of a certain system of opinions confidently ascribed to the triumph of divine grace, and a dissent from them as confidently imputed to the presumptuous exercise of reason, and a proud independence of spiritual direction;—of the value, necessity, and reality of which direction, both parties, perhaps, are equally convinced, though they may differ as to the nature of its evidence, and the mode of its operation on the understanding?

I have elsewhere observed, that an opinion may be true, and yet the adoption of

it, in particular cases, may be founded upon a prejudice. I may also remark here, that where the fundamental principles of the Gospel have been received upon a conviction of the judgment, to which we have been led through the instrumentality of persons entertaining any characteristic peculiarities of opinion, we are apt unconsciously to imbibe these peculiarities, and to amalgamate them, as it were, with the great truths which we have learned through the same instrumentality. This is a natural, and almost an universal, prejudice; and, (I believe,) is the ground of most of those minor distinctions which mark our religious parties. In offering a few farther observations upon it, I shall confine myself to the acknowledged fact, that a strong Calvinistic bias marks the religious system of many of our most eminent Christians; and seems in some, to have almost synchronized with their conversion from a life, of indifference, of vanity, or of unbelief, while in others, it may very clearly be traced to early impression and education. I select not these

examples, with a view to suggest that there is not a strong prejudice on the other side; for in reality, I believe the love of system is to be found in all religious parties; neither do I presume to controvert the Calvinistic scheme, though I will confess that I cannot adopt it. My object, at present, is only to prove that the frequent association of these peculiar principles, with deep and sudden impressions of religion, may be accounted for, without supposing their self-evident connection with fundamental doctrines, or tracing them exclusively to that subjugation and abasement of spirit, confessedly so necessary to an effectual reception of the gospel.

This leads me directly to the subject which I had proposed for discussion in the present letter, (viz. the causes of religious prejudice,) and which I conclude you have been expecting through every page, with your usual admiration of my digressive propensities. I must, however, still disap-

point you, rather than compress a question so delicate, within the closing pages of an epistle, which I fear you will think too long already.

Ever yours, truly.

LETTER IX.

INCIDENTAL CAUSES OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION.

CAUSES OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION. — INCIDENTAL AND MORAL. — INCIDENTAL CAUSES. — PROBABLE CAUSES OF THE PREVAILING BIAS TOWARDS CALVINISM. — INFLUENCE OF EXAMPLE AND ASSOCIATION. — PREVIOUS IMPRESSIONS. — SENSE OF PERSONAL GUILT. — SERIOUS HABITS ATTRACTIVE IN SUCH A CASE. — HUMILITY OF JUDGMENT ATTENDANT ON RECENT CONVERSION. — DIFFERENCES OF PRACTICAL DISCIPLINE. — DISTINCTIONS ARISING FROM THENCE. — PRESENT PARTIES IN THE CHURCH. — NATURAL ASSOCIATION OF SERIOUS PERSONS WITH EACH OTHER. — APPREHENSION OF THE CHARGE OF CALVINISM. — PROBABLE MEANS OF COUNTERACTING THESE PREJUDICES. — EARLY CALVINISM. — RECAPITULATION. — CONCLUSION.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

WITHOUT farther preface I shall enter upon the enquiry proposed in my last, respecting the probable causes of prejudice in religion. Its consequences are unhappily too obvious, in the present history of our Church, and will afford ample subjects for future consideration.

The causes of religious prejudice may be divided into two classes, incidental and moral. The former, I apprehend, are chiefly connected with prejudices of opinion, and the latter, with what I have ventured to call prejudices of passion ; though, in some instances, the case is reversed, and the bias of opinion may originate in culpable motives and tempers, while the impression upon the affections may be innocent and involuntary, and sometimes perhaps even laudable.

It would lead us too far to attempt a regular enumeration of the incidental causes of religious prejudice ; causes, probably as numerous, and as various in their operation, as the accidents and associations which form the features of the intellectual character. In selecting one portion of this wide field for our observation, I would merely present it as a specimen of the whole ; and, in endeavouring to trace the origin of some peculiar predilections noticed in my last, I

would carefully separate the fact of the existence of these predilections, from the abstract truth of the doctrine in question ; a point which must rest upon its own evidence, and cannot be fairly established or disproved, by any reference to the example or authority of man.

I must also remind you, that, under this head of incidental prejudice, I do not include any questions of the fundamental doctrines of religion, nor any of those feelings of personal estrangement or dislike, (if such feelings can exist between sincere Christians,) which separate religious parties from each other. These belong rather to the class of moral prejudices, and will come more properly under our notice hereafter. Let us now advert to the fact before mentioned, and endeavour to trace the origin of that bias towards the Calvinistic principles, which is admitted to be the distinction of a large, and very pious portion, of the members of our national Church.

The wide and rapid progress of these principles, and their general association with a very edifying seriousness of life, have been urged, with equal confidence and plausibility, as arguments of their scriptural truth, and moral influence. But the fallacy, or at least the insufficiency, of this affirmative proof, is very evident; though the fact may be admitted as an unanswerable refutation of the prejudice which would represent these principles as necessarily hostile to morality. The truth seems to be, that these serious habits of life, and the opinions with which they are commonly united, act with a sort of reciprocity upon each other, not so much from any natural attraction or coherency, (if I may call it so,) as from peculiarities of previous association, and a certain preparation and predisposition of mind, originating in local and variable causes.

I have already noticed our propensity to imbibe the general religious system of those to whom we are indebted for our first

serious impressions; and to this propensity, I think, we may often trace the sudden and unhesitating adoption of the tenets peculiarly Calvinistic, which has been supposed to result exclusively from a diligent and unbiassed perusal of the Scriptures, free from the influence of those human schemes and systems, that are so apt to take possession of the mind, under the more regular and gradual process of a religious education.

There are two circumstances attending these recent conversions, which, though they do not invalidate their sincerity, diminish their importance, or weaken the evidence of the Divine mercy in their production, may lead us to question the arguments drawn from them, in defence of peculiar interpretations of Scripture; or at least to suspect, that however these interpretations might be established by such an enquiry as is here supposed, the capacity for such an enquiry is commonly precluded by the circumstances of the case. In the

history of these conversions, (at least in the great majority of instances which are detailed in the religious biography of our day,) we find that the excitement to the study of Scripture, has been communicated through the medium of some tract or memoir,—designed, indeed, and generally well adapted to prepare the mind for the fundamental truths of the Gospel, but combining with these truths, some peculiarity of application, and drawing them into such connection with other doctrines more questionable, or less important, as to form, in the mind of the inexperienced enquirer, a chain very difficult to be broken.

Through this preparatory instruction, he comes to the study of his Bible; and, attaching to the texts which have been impressed upon his mind, the interpretation under which he at first received them, he naturally forms his principles upon this interpretation. He collates the Scripture evidence for these principles, probably under the same instruction; or shrinking

from the task of a general collation of texts, as affording too much scope for an exercise of reason, which he has been taught to consider as presumptuous, he fastens upon some strong and insulated position, and, connecting it with the practical or historical commentary through which he has perhaps been led to the contemplation of it, he receives it as a leading and unquestionable principle ; and frames his whole scheme in accordance, if not in subserviency, to this primary impression.

Another circumstance, from which, I think, a strong tendency to such an impression, may be derived, is the deep conviction of hereditary and actual sinfulness, which must precede an implicit reception of the salvation revealed in the Gospel, and will be felt with additional force, in cases of aggravation, or recent transgression. "What am I, oh Lord, and what is my father's house, that thou hast brought me hitherto?" are questions which must occur to every converted sinner, trembling under the consciousness of guilt, and first awakened

to a hope of the Divine mercy; and it is not, perhaps, unnatural, that he should seek in the doctrine of a personal and gratuitous election, the solution of a mystery which overpowers his understanding, as much as it affects and interests his heart. However his more extended and matured enquiry may enlarge his views of the divine impartiality, it is not unnatural, that, in the first fervour of his gratitude, he should receive such a call, as a special and peculiar privilege; and finding the “still small voice” unheard by the sinners around him, amongst whom he perhaps considers himself as the chief, that he should ascribe to an absolute and irrespective decree, an election, which he cannot trace to any fitness in himself, or to any comparative demerit in his brethren.

In allowing the probability that such an inference might be drawn from the contemplation of the Divine clemency, in connection with the deep sense of personal unworthiness, I would not be understood

to admit it, as the necessary or obvious result of this contemplation. It appears to me, that many who reject the doctrine of election, and who have never been led to deduce it either from personal impression or Scriptural evidence, may nevertheless entertain a deep and decided conviction of their natural sinfulness and depravity, and unreservedly ascribe all that is good in them, to the free grace of God. I might cite many individual instances in our church, (if you will not allow me an appeal to her formularies,) to prove the complete separability of these doctrines: and for more general proof I might refer you to the scheme of the Arminian Methodists, who appear to differ from the Calvinists, only on the doctrines of predestination and indefectible grace, and agree with them (inconsistently enough,) in that of assurance,—to which those doctrines seem necessary as a foundation.

There is also, (if I may so speak,) a sort of *personal* Calvinism, which we some-

times find united, in humble and pious minds, with a general admission of the more liberal scheme ; a belief of the Divine election, as it relates to themselves, with a conviction of the truth and universality of the Scripture promises and declarations ; an assurance, that wherever the commands of the Gospel are proclaimed, the power of evangelical obedience will be vouchsafed ; that wherever the faith of the Gospel is preached, the capacity to receive it effectually, will be conferred.

I must remind you, that I have here had in view, not the truth or authority of the doctrine in question, but the proneness of the mind, under certain circumstances, to receive it. This is, (I confess,) a metaphysical problem beyond my powers of solution ; yet the fact appears to me so evident, as not a little to detract from the argument in defence of this doctrine which it has been urged to support.

That an adoption of the Calvinistic te-

nets has appeared, in many instances, almost to synchronize with a decided and practical change of life, it is impossible to deny. But I think this may rather be considered as an accident or accessory attending such a change, than as its originating principle. The practical strictness of the Calvinistic discipline, (I do not now enter into its historical origin, or assert its general necessity,) is eminently calculated to attract the attention of those who are mourning under a conviction of sin, who are earnestly desirous to forsake it, and to lay aside every weight that may impede their progress in the way of salvation. In cases of sudden conversion, especially from a life of levity and dissipation, it is common, and very generally expedient, to break as far as possible, all past associations and habits, and to refrain even from innocent indulgences, if they cannot be enjoyed without abuse or excess. Under this impression, the recent convert will be led to associate chiefly with those, from whom he may expect most instruction and encouragement in his new

course of discipline and self-denial; and even when he has not been originally awakened by the call of a Calvinistic preacher, if he finds in Calvinistic society, the Christian energy and firmness which he feels to be necessary to his support, and owns to be consonant to his new views of duty,—whatever may be at first his prejudice against their doctrines,—whatever may be his natural, or (if you will allow me the expressions,) his rational or Scriptural objection to their opinions,—he will learn successively to tolerate, to respect, and, if he have not a very independent mind, to adopt them: and he will probably vindicate his change of sentiment, by an appeal to the Scripture text, and refer to the manifest excellence of the result, for evidence of the worth of the principle.

It is obvious also, that, under an acquaintance with Scripture, so recent as we have supposed, and, if not in utter ignorance of polemical questions, at least unaccustomed to consider or to discuss them,

our convert must come quite unarmed to the controversy ; and hearing only the arguments on one side, and these arguments urged by authorities whom he respects, and supported by what he is instructed to consider, as a sort of experimental evidence, he will probably be led to assent to a demonstration which he finds himself unable to confute ; and, with a very natural partiality, he will attribute his defeat (if he considers it as such,) rather to the weakness of the cause he had espoused, than to his own deficiency as an advocate.

I believe, however, that the first intercourse with society professedly religious, is sought rather in a penitential than a polemical spirit ; that, with a sense of his moral and spiritual deficiencies, the recent convert will commonly feel a doubt of his doctrinal knowledge ; and will rather sit at the feet of his new friends, as a learner, than stand amongst them, as a disputer. Such a frame of mind, though favourable to the essential necessities of his case, must ob-

viously warp the general freedom of his judgment ; and prepare him for an implicit admission of the system which these his chosen instructors may have adopted.

If there be any truth in this view of the process under which a bias towards the Calvinistic principles may naturally be generated in the mind, and if a counteraction of this bias be desirable, it will not be irrelevant to our purpose to enquire where such a counteraction may be found. Into a question so delicate in itself, and involved in so much additional difficulty by protracted and angry discussion, I should not presume to enter with any controversial argument : but there are certain moral suggestions which seem to me to bear more strongly upon the case, and to apply more directly to the prejudices which I have been endeavouring to describe.

Of these prejudices, as exemplified in the instances I have noticed, we may observe, that the origin is uniformly laudable ;

and that, consequently, any attempt to detect them, or to disentangle them from the sounder principles with which they have been associated, can be successful only through a clear and full exhibition of these principles, operating independently of such an association.

If we look back upon the history of the church at an early period of our domestic controversies, we shall find a peculiar seriousness of deportment, and strictness of practical (or perhaps I might rather say, of ritual) discipline, to have been one of the characteristic distinctions of the Puritan party, as it was indeed the origin of the Puritan name. To what excess this discipline might have been carried, or how far it might have led, in some instances, to severity, or might have been associated with hypocrisy, in others, it is irrelevant to our purpose, to enquire: and it is evident, that if the system, or any part of it, could be proved to be right in itself, the injury resulting from its abuse or excess, would

afford no fair argument against it. The point now to be observed, however, is only this, — that it formed a prominent and obvious *mark of distinction* ; and, in the strict self-government which it seemed to prescribe, afforded a presumption, if not a reasonable pledge, of the sincerity of those who should adopt it.

The discipline thus pertinaciously enforced by one party in the Church, we find as decidedly rejected by the other; and from the well-known tendency of extremes, to produce their opposites, we are enabled to trace, at this period, a proportional and growing relaxation in the system of the Establishment : till the vindication of the liberty of the Christian sabbath from the judaical strictness of the Sabbatarians, terminated at last, in a general, and almost a legal, desecration of that holy day.

Of the influence of this event upon the interests of the Church, and the popularity of her governors, I need not remind you.

Happily it suggests no parallel to our present experience. The duties appropriate to the Christian sabbath, do not now form a subject of controversy ; but are unanimously enforced and discharged by all classes of conscientious ministers. The spirit of Christian self-denial is inculcated, whatever may be difference of judgment as to the points in which this spirit should be exercised.

Yet, it cannot be denied, that a certain jealousy of over strictness, is felt by a very large party amongst us ; and retaliated (if I may so speak,) by an imputation of worldliness, too often applied without reserve or discrimination. The peculiar habits of each class, are also associated with certain historical predilections, which lead to a distinction in the line of theological studies, or at least to a different estimate of authorities : and thence arises in both, a sort of *esprit de corps*, which leads too often to a mutual estrangement, if not to something very like mutual intolerance.

I have already remarked on the difficulty of deciding for others, upon prudential questions, which ought chiefly to be judged by a reference to individual feelings and character. In applying this remark to the present subject, I would limit it to the truly pious on both sides ; to those who differ in judgment rather than in principle ; and who are equally desirous to “ serve the Lord,” whether in a more general intercourse with society, or in a life of stricter seclusion. And here I must observe, that the spirit of the world is not always renounced, when its lighter engagements are forsaken ; and that even, in the proneness to censure the society which he has, perhaps conscientiously left, a Christian may find a trial more arduous than the levities or vices of the world could have presented ; while the fear of exhibiting religion as unamiable or morose, may lead another, equally sincere in his profession, and zealous for the honour of his Lord, into compliances which his judgment disapproves, if his conscience does not condemn them.

Though each of these prejudices has its effect, in strengthening the bias towards the Calvinistic principles, which arises from incidental association, I am inclined to think this effect is most extensively produced by the prejudice last mentioned. I have already observed, that serious company will naturally be sought by the serious convert to religion ; and that an interest in his pursuits, and a sympathy with his sufferings, will be the strongest recommendation to his attachment. If, under these new and awful impressions, the more awful, perhaps, from their novelty, he finds not this sympathy in his own society ; if his fears are treated as visionary, and his feelings as enthusiastic ; if, instead of being encouraged to a sober investigation of his case, he is urged to turn away from the contemplation ; and if, through a well-meant, but ill-advised, solicitude for his quiet, religious conversation is generally avoided, or led into channels in which he perceives a constant reference to his supposed enthusiasm, no soundness of belief,

no accuracy of theological statement, no Scriptural illustration of doctrinal questions will reconcile him to an association where heart answers not to heart. It is not of the truth of the Christian Religion, that he doubts; it is not of the doctrines or the precepts of Christianity that he wants a clearer explanation; it is a balm for his wounded spirit that he seeks; and he will shrink with deep and bitter feeling, from the caustic irony or contemptuous pity that tells him his wounds are imaginary!

It appears to me, that, in the desire to oppose some erroneous, and, perhaps, enthusiastic, opinions upon the doctrine of conversion, a sufficient allowance has not always been made for the strong, but salutary, impressions to which I have adverted. While the speculative truth has been stated with clearness, and carefully guarded from perversion, it has not been sufficiently distinguished from the personal feeling; nor has the treatment of the latter, been always

regulated according to the circumstances and temper of the patient. And this (I suspect) has contributed to prejudice some well meaning persons, who might have been gradually convinced by reason, if they had been encouraged by sympathy and respect.

It is exceedingly difficult to discuss the practical part of this question (to which I wish to confine myself) without some excitement of party feeling, and an occasional use of party phrases. The latter circumstance I the more lament, because I think many good Christians amongst us, have been separated rather by terms than by principles; who, if they had not been precluded from intercourse, by the apprehension of probable disagreement, would have found, in their essential coincidence of opinion, a bond of Christian union, and in the free collision and communication of ideas, an exercise for Christian charity.

In classing the two great parties in our Church, under the denominations of evangelical and orthodox, I rather adopt these terms as popular, than chuse them as appropriate ; and I mean not here to enter farther into the distinction, than as it is connected with the prejudices under our review.

In the former class, I need hardly observe, that we find an almost universal adoption of the strictness of the puritanic discipline, and a very frequent, though not an universal, profession of the Calvinistic tenets. Even where these tenets are not entertained, the use of a peculiar phraseology, derived from Calvinistic books and company, renders the distinction often imperceptible to a careless or cursory observer : and hence has arisen the common impression of a necessary connection between them. Without contending for the obligation of this discipline, and even admitting that some excellent persons have been over strict in their attachment to it, and severe in requiring it as a test of religious character,

we must confess that its spirit is most congenial to the feelings of an alarmed and awakened mind ; and that a serious anxiety for salvation, like every other serious and engrossing passion, (but in an infinitely higher degree,) will make lighter pursuits uninteresting or wearisome. It is as often from distaste, as from moral disapprobation, that an indiscriminate intercourse with the world, is declined, as the Christian character advances ; and the religious man as naturally prefers the society of those with whom he can expatiate freely, upon his favourite subjects, as the lover of science, or of the fine arts, seeks the company of those who can understand his feelings, and appreciate his pursuits.

From this circumstance, as well as from the presumptive evidence it affords, that those who adopt it are in earnest in religion, we may reasonably conclude that this serious scheme of life will derive a strong attraction, and will give a proportionate influence to the party professing it : and if

the majority of this party hold any peculiar doctrines, such influence may be fairly expected to operate in the diffusion of these doctrines, as well as in the inculcation of their practical discipline. Hence, my friend, I would infer, that if seriousness, or an appearance of devotedness to religion, be considered as the distinction of a party in the church, and be actually and generally (however capriciously) associated with the reputation of Calvinism, serious persons will imbibe a prejudice in favour of that system. They will be led to it, through this association. And even if they do not entirely adopt the Calvinistic principles, they will chuse to take their portion with those who hold them.

I apply not this remark to those opponents of Calvinism, who direct their opposition against its seriousness alone—who are the advocates, not of the Church, but of the world—and quarrel equally with every scheme that involves the duties of self-

denial and self-restraint — but I would suggest to those friends of the Church who acknowledge the obligation of these duties, that the *personal* application of the principle, must rest with the conscience and temper of the individual; and that it is infinitely safer to indulge even a morbid tenderness of conscience, than to draw the boundary line of compliance too near the verge of the forbidden ground, where the attraction of sin increases, while the power of resistance proportionally declines.

I may add, that the very argument upon which we claim the allowance of our Christian liberty, may fairly be urged by our stricter brethren, in defence of their peculiar scruples. To their own master, they stand or fall: and if our exemption from such scruples, be the result of a clearer judgment, (of which, however, we cannot be certain,) it does not release them from restrictions which their consciences approve, and which their spiritual condition may require.

Allow me here to add a few words upon a sort of counter-prejudice, which (in my mind) has had no small effect in widening the present divisions. The general association of serious habits with Calvinism, has led to an association, equally capricious, and more dangerous, of soundness in church principle, with a large indulgence in secular pursuits and amusements; and a fear of the imputation of Calvinistic opinions has held many well-meaning persons, in the trammels of the world, and restrained them from a decided profession of religion. I believe this apprehension sometimes contributes to produce an apparent levity of practice and conversation, where there is not a correspondent levity of heart; and that some who fall under the indiscriminate censure of the stricter party, if they do not actually "condemn in themselves, the thing which they allow" and sanction by their example, — would be found, if they were fully understood, either to yield their compliance with such pursuits, as a sort of sacrifice to prejudice, or to adopt them as

a vindication of independence, where they apprehend their right of private judgment to be invaded.

It is not, however, by the jealous assertion of this right, in points of a disputable nature, but by an entire tolerance upon such points, and a careful separation of them, from the essentials of religion, that the discords in our church will be healed, and her true interests advanced. And it is by exhibiting the whole beauty and consistency of the Christian character, in a state of obvious separation from the peculiar principles of Calvinism, that those who deprecate the extension of these principles in the Church, can best dissolve the association through which they are promoted. Nothing will so effectually remove the bias towards these principles, as the display of a sounder system under the same association; and the exercise of a modest and charitable allowance for discrepancies of opinion which are unimportant, or for errors of judgment which are unavoidable.

It is unnecessary to enlarge upon some remarkable instances of conversion, in which the Calvinistic principles appear to have been rather resumed than adopted; where these principles have been communicated with the first religious instruction, and endeared by the fondest domestic * association; and in the subsequent shipwreck of the faith, amidst the shoals and quicksands of the world, seem to have been rather forgotten than discarded. But of these cases it may be observed, that however we may acknowledge the reality and entireness of the moral and spiritual conversion, the bias of early education and impression has manifestly a share in forming the doctrinal opinions; and under the feelings which usually accompany such a change of character, these opinions are not always subjected to a close or dispassionate investigation. The *whole* of the faith which

* The names of Gardiner, Newton, and Buchanan will here occur to the reader:—many others might be cited.

had been rejected or disregarded, is humbly and penitently resumed, and every article of the early creed recovers its place in the system.

In either view, therefore, whether of the recent adoption of these doctrines under particular circumstances, or the return to them after a long intermission, it appears to me that the principle of association should be taken into the account ; and that although the influence of this principle, cannot be urged to disprove the abstract truth of the doctrines, it may fairly be adduced to suggest a doubt, whether their reception in the mind of the convert, has been the result of their clear and irresistible evidence.

You will say that I have betrayed my own prejudice, in applying these observations exclusively to Calvinism ; but I will allow you the full use of the principle, in its application to the Arminian system, or to any of the schemes, whatever they may be called, which distinguish our religious parties.

One inference, however, I must draw from the general argument ; viz. that the faith which we are told is the gift of God, and graciously made by him, available to salvation, must be a moral, and not an intellectual quality ; and that however the illumination of the understanding may be aided by human instruments, or affected by the varieties of circumstance and education, in the attainment of a right view of those doctrines of Scripture which relate to the divine character and counsels, it is only by the power of the new creating spirit of God, that man is enabled to “ believe with the heart unto righteousness.” Indeed this very singular expression, “ believing with the *heart*,” sufficiently marks the distinction ; and the divine origin of this faith, is proved by the strength and uniformity of its operation, in cases the most remote, and under associations the most dissimilar.

I need not detain you with a more particular enquiry into the incidental causes of religious prejudice ; which I think may

generally be resolved into the two I have mentioned; viz. early impression, and the partiality resulting from certain casual associations. The moral causes would admit of a fuller, and, perhaps, a more strictly practical, discussion; but they have been so often investigated by abler enquirers, in connection with other questions of morality, that I shall treat them as briefly as possible. Little as I mean to say, however, I must postpone it till my next; and, in the mean time, beg of you to believe me,

Yours, &c. &c.

LETTER X.

MORAL CAUSES OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION.

MORAL CAUSES OF PREJUDICE. — PRIDE. — PRIDE OF HEREDITARY OPINION. — PRIDE OF INNOVATION. — PRIDE OF CONSISTENCY. — CURIOSITY. — A PROBATIONARY QUALITY. — ITS MISAPPLICATION UPON RELIGIOUS SUBJECTS A SOURCE OF ERROR, AND OF PREJUDICE IN OPINION. — PERSONAL PREJUDICE THE RESULT. — ZEAL. — A PROBATIONARY QUALITY. — ITS ABUSE INJURIOUS, BUT ITS ABSENCE DESTRUCTIVE TO RELIGION. — MISAPPLICATION OF ZEAL. — GRADUAL AGGRAVATION OF DIVISIONS. — NECESSITY OF DISTINGUISHING ZEAL FROM TEMPER. — BEST MODE OF ASCERTAINING THIS DISTINCTION. — UNIVERSAL FALLIBILITY. — NO COMPROMISE OF FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES. — PRACTICAL ZEAL.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

OF the moral causes of prejudice in religion, the first and most obvious, and, perhaps, one of the most universal, is pride. This vice exists in various forms in the world, and adapts its operation, to all the varieties of character with which it may be combined.

One of its most common effects, in the application to spiritual subjects, is an indisposition to acquiesce in established principles and forms; a propensity to seek out new paths for itself; a desire of superior reputation for acuteness, knowledge, or piety; and a certain stubbornness and tenacity of adherence to the favourite opinion or party, with a peremptory and indiscriminate condemnation of all others.

It is true, that pride often stimulates the zeal with which we contend for hereditary opinions, and that the imputation thrown upon our judgment, offends us as much as the attack upon our principles: but there is a pride of personal eminence, associated with the spirit of innovation in religion, though not always its originating cause; and whatever may be the apparent, or actual, sacrifice, of interest, or early prejudice, it is possible, that a large compensation may be found in increased applause and popularity. I think Bishop Taylor says, that human praise is the greatest of

all temptations ; and that a minister, or a Christian, in any public calling, should never pray so earnestly for humility, as when he finds himself growing in popular favour, or improving in the qualifications likely to obtain it. Indeed, if pride were not the predominant passion of the human heart, and praise its highest gratification, the Heathen moralists would not so generally have exalted the love of fame, to a place in the catalogue of virtues. In the formation of their ethical systems, these sages appear to have allowed and encouraged this passion, even when they urged the excision of every other ; and it is, perhaps, in the very different estimate of it, which Christianity presents, that we best discern the superiority of the Christian philosophy.

We have melancholy experience, however, around us, and too often (I fear) within us, to prove that our professed deprecation of pride is not attended with a correspondent feeling. This besetting sin mingles with all that we call our virtues ;

and infuses into them, a vitiated and debasing quality. To our firmness, it adds pertinacity, to our zeal, intolerance, and even to our humility, affectation: and it operates most injuriously, perhaps, under the disguise of this, its opposite grace.

But the circumstance more immediately connected with the subject of our present observations, is, the radical hostility of this passion, to that spirit of candour, so necessary in all cases, to the investigation of truth, even considered apart from the feelings which our moral interest in the truths in question, might be expected to awaken. This appears, particularly in controversial cases, in a certain identification of personal credit, with the defence of the tenets to which the disputant is pledged; and a reluctance to acknowledge the slightest change of opinion, lest he should incur the charge of a want of judgment, or of consistency. In this intellectual humiliation, before the tribunal of his fellows, the pride of the natural man, finds sometimes a harder

trial, than in the acknowledgment of his moral deficiencies, before the throne of his God. Even when his reason forces upon him, the conviction of an error, this baneful feeling will restrain the confession of it; or when persuaded that his principle is correct, and would probably be admitted, if clearly understood by his opponent, a repugnance to make the first step in concession, and a peremptory or sophistical contention for terms, will still prove its existence within him.

I have already remarked, and shall often have occasion to recur to the observation, that much of the acrimony of our present controversies, may be traced to this captiousness of definition. How much of it, may be connected with the feeling under our consideration, it is not for me to enquire. This is, in fact, a question of private and practical application, which few can suggest to others, but all who honestly examine their own hearts, can decide experimentally for themselves.

We have still to notice the influence of pride, in promoting and aggravating the prejudices of passion. But I must first touch upon some other moral causes, connected more immediately with prejudices of opinion, yet appearing to possess the same double relation to the affections and understanding ; and producing equally, the spirit of jealous alienation between Christians of different habits and modes of thinking.

It is a sad proof of the perverse ingenuity of man, if not of the ingenuity of a being more perverse and more powerful, that the best gifts of Providence, are often converted into instruments of mischief ; and that the qualities most favourable to intellectual and moral improvement, may be rendered most hostile to both, by their misapplication. Let us apply this remark to the passions of curiosity and zeal ; which, in their legitimate operation upon the mind, are eminently propitious to the advancement of knowledge and of piety ;

while in their perversion, they may fairly be considered as obstructions to both, — and included amongst the causes of prejudice, or at least of dissension, in religion.

It has been so much the practice in religious discussions, to consider curiosity as a vice, and zeal as a virtue, that I fear you will think it a fanciful speculation, to reduce these qualities to their abstract form, and separate them from the ideas connected with their existence in the person of a moral and responsible agent. Under this view, however, they appear, like many other affections implanted by the Creator, neither morally virtuous, nor vicious in themselves, but capable of a moral application or perversion ; and proportionally instrumental to the improvement or deterioration of the character with which they are combined. In this respect they differ from pride, and from the malevolent passions, — which are naturally and abstractedly vicious, — and cannot be divested of their moral turpitude, by any culture or

modification. And this distinction, by the way, may suggest an answer to a favourite cavil of infidelity; viz., that the original righteousness ascribed to our first parents, seems inconsistent with the possibility of their fall, as the notion of a perfect virtue includes impeccability; and that consequently, the passions upon which temptation could be successfully exercised, must have been morally vicious in their character. We find, however, the first temptation in Paradise, addressed to the passion of curiosity; one of those probationary qualities, (if I may call it so,) which was to derive its character, from its application, and the free exercise of which, was quite compatible with a perfectly upright, though not an impeccable, nature.

It is, indeed, by a beautiful provision of his divine wisdom, that having made the human mind susceptible of impressions through the senses, our great Creator has furnished it with a passion, whose peculiar office it is to seek and invite those impres-

sions, and to collect new materials for thought, from every passing incident and object. From the useless curiosity of the child, breaking its toys to discover their construction, to the memorable exclamation of the Sicilian mathematician, when an accident had enabled him to solve the problem to which he had in vain applied the powers of his gigantic mind, we discern the legitimate operation of this passion, and the pleasure inseparably annexed to its gratification. It is, in fact, the spring that gives motion to the understanding, and leads it on from step to step, in the acquisition of new materials for its exercise, and of new powers for the combination and arrangement of its ideas. It reconciles the traveller, to labours the most severe, and dangers the most appalling; and rewards with the consciousness of a daily accession of improvement, the intense and patient application to which it stimulates the student. In a word, so far as relates to this world, it may very fairly be called the key of knowledge; as it is the

principle which awakens the appetite, and incites us to the pursuit of it.

But it is still with us, as it was with our first parents : we are not satisfied with the knowledge that is attainable, and the mental food that is convenient for us. Our curiosity takes a bolder flight, and would wing its eagle way, even to the highest Heaven, and gaze with unrestrained presumption and familiarity, on Him who sitteth upon the throne, and before whom the Angels veil their faces. Still we would be as “as Gods ;” and boldly overleap the pale of our nature and our capacities : and bitterly as we must rue the knowledge of evil, which this perverted ambition has introduced into the world, would proudly rise against that deference to instruction, and obedience to authority, which become us as created and dependent beings, — compelled by daily and hourly experience, to the humbling acknowledgement of ignorance and imbecility, — and constantly discovering the limits of our faculties, even in

their application to the things that are around us. To the investigation of these, however, we have a fair encouragement in the observation, that it is seldom entirely unsuccessful ; that knowledge is generally to be gained in proportion to our industry ; and that the faculties which are the instruments of its acquisition, are sharpened and strengthened by exercise.

But it is in its application to those parts of knowledge, which God has thought fit to seclude from all possibility of human attainment, that the indulgence of curiosity may become pernicious or criminal. In this class, we may place the mysterious doctrines of revelation, — which seem to have been proposed as trials of man's faith, but not as themes for the exercise of his intellect ; and to which, indeed, the human faculties are so utterly incompetent, that the very intense-ness of the contemplation, serves but to render the object less distinct, and, like perpetual gazing on the Sun, dazzles the eyes which might have been better used in seeking the way of salvation, under its light.

The effects of this perverted curiosity, are visible in numberless instances, from the reveries of Behmen to the reasonings of Socinus ; and whether it leads to the presumption of new and special revelations, or to the still greater presumption of scepticism and self-dependence, the indulgence of it is equally inconsistent with the sober, and humble, and practical study of Scripture, commended by the sacred writers in various eminent examples.

Yet I fear, my friend, that we all too much partake of this spirit, which we are so ready to condemn ; and search the Scripture, when we search it at all, not, like the Bereans, to know *whether* these things are so, but *how* they are so ; — not, whether its mysteries are positively announced, and its predictions unquestionably accomplished, but whether the former are intelligible to our reason, — (in which case, by the way, they would be no mysteries,) — and the latter consistent with our notions of the rules that ought to govern the divine administration. We avert our contemplation from

that law of the Lord, in which the Psalmist delighted to meditate, and endeavour to pierce the cloud that veils from mortal eyes, the glories of his divine nature: vainly imagining that he is either such a one as ourselves, and wrapped in no mysteries but of man's creating, or that, with a fond and special partiality, he has raised the veil for our peculiar illumination.

In proportion as either of these impressions attaches us to particular speculations in religion, will it lessen our respect for the judgment of our brethren, and our charity for their persons. You will not, perhaps, immediately acquiesce in the observation, that personal prejudice is so generally associated with prejudices of opinion; and you will allege in reply, the distinction between persons and principles, so universally made in religious controversy. But try the question by a more practical test, and examine your own feeling towards those societies of Christians who differ from

you in religious opinions, or towards those individuals who have publicly maintained the principles from which you dissent. Abstract from the case all the accidental partialities of neighbourhood, and acquaintance, and secular society, which may have endeared the person, in spite of his opinions, (or possibly, as we seem to love a friend best in sickness, the more for them); and consider, whether the imputation of such opinions (whatever they may be, if they differ from your own) does not operate within you, as a principle of alienation from your brother, so long as they are the only parts of his character with which you are acquainted. “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” has been the question of prejudice, from the days of our Lord, to our own: and whatever general and prominent character, prejudice may attribute to any system or society, it will almost certainly, though perhaps involuntarily, apply to the individuals who compose that society, and who patronize that system.

It is not, perhaps, quite philosophical, to consider zeal as an abstract quality, nor possible, to separate it, under the common definition, from some appropriate subject for its exercise. I believe I should rather describe it as a certain constitutional ardour and energy of mind, which forms, if I may so express it, the material of the quality, and derives the name, from its application to some particular object.

In thus considering zeal, as a passion or quality, capable of being applied to good or evil purposes, and deriving its moral character, from this application, we are warranted by the testimony of Scripture and of experience. We may also observe, that the operation of this passion upon the heart, bears a certain analogy to that of curiosity upon the intellect, and that it is either the spring of all that is excellent, or of all that is extravagant and erroneous, in conduct and opinion.

We have a beautiful description of this quality, in its right exercise upon its noblest

object, in the reply of our blessed Lord to the entangling question, suggested by the blind and bitter zeal of the Pharisees* : and we have the testimony of the Apostle Paul, (in whose early history the sad effects of mistaken zeal are awfully exemplified,) that “ it is good to be zealously affected in a good thing.” It is not, however, as we learn from the same authority, enough that this zeal should be rightly directed, if it be not judiciously exercised ; and with all the tenderness and charity for involuntary error, which the divine grace had taught him, (for it was evidently no part of his natural character,) we find the Apostle admitting the value of the principle which attached his Judaizing brethren to their law, though he clearly pointed out the danger and guilt of not examining the grounds upon which the exercise of this principle should be regulated.

But I am now to confine myself to a few

* Matthew, chap. 22. ver. 37.

remarks upon the influence of zeal in stimulating prejudice, and awakening dissensions, in religion : and to notice some points in which its misdirection (for excess there can be none, when it is guided by judgment) has contributed to disturb the tranquillity of the church, and to destroy that unity of spirit among Christians, which alone can preserve the bond of peace unbroken.

Before we proceed farther, let me observe, that if the abuse of this quality, be injurious to religious peace, its absence, is destructive of the very life of religion : and indeed it would appear, that a serious conviction of the truth of revelation, could hardly exist in the mind without awakening the correspondent feeling,—however it may be warped in some instances by corrupt passions, or paralyzed by secular engagements and temptations.

It would not, perhaps, be difficult to trace, to well-intentioned, but mistaken,

zeal, much of the fanaticism, and many of the superstitions, that have at different times, disturbed and corrupted the Church. But we are now only to notice the effect of this passion, in dividing her against herself, and sowing dissension even between Christians who are generally agreed in essential doctrines. This often arises, (as I have observed elsewhere,) from a neglect of distinguishing the essentials, and circumstantials of religion ; and leads us to visit a difference of judgment in the latter, with a censure as severe as would be applicable to the perversion or denial of the former. Through this warm contention for inferior points, those who have substantially embraced the same faith, have yet violated charity, and sometimes broken communion. Such minute differences have been aggravated into subjects of hot and lasting controversy ; and the disputes raised about some pin or nail of the Temple, some point of discipline, or question of expediency, have shaken and endangered the whole fabric, and robbed the Church of

that unity which was its strongest cement and support.

This seems to have been the origin of the first internal divisions that disturbed the peace of our reformed portion of the Church; and for some years, no other cause of dissension is apparent. But questions like these, could not long remain the sole ground of separation between Christians. Piety and reason would equally revolt against such unbrotherly and causeless alienation; and the appetite of polemical zeal would demand more substantial food. Accordingly, we find the early distinctions of discipline, soon aggravated by growing discrepancies of doctrine, and these again multiplied by minute and captious explications of truths in which all were agreed. Of the doctrine of justification alone, there are said to have been not less than twenty definitions, most of them perfectly reconcileable with each other; and upon other fundamental points, the difference seems to have been rather in the process of induction and illustration, than in

principle. Yet party zeal would not be satisfied with an acquiescence in the same conclusion, unless it were attained through the same premises; and every step in the demonstration was contested, even where the similarity of the result could not be denied.

To these differences, gradually succeeded others more marked and comprehensive; and the extension of religious division, in the introduction of a variety of sects, was the necessary consequence. Within the Church, however, unless where a spirit of latent scepticism, or an attachment to the Calvinistic principles*, has created a broader line of doctrinal distinction, it seems to me that these discrepancies are generally reconcilable, and have been much exaggerated by the jealousy of habitual contro-

* I would not be understood here to say that Calvinism is inconsistent with fidelity to the Church; but merely, that it cannot be entirely assimilated with her more general evangelical doctrines.

versy. Objections have been aggravated on each side, through a fear of consequences attached or imputed ; and there has been often much warm disputation, where there was really little difference of opinion. And here it is, I apprehend, that religious prejudice is most insidious in its character ; because apparently most pure in its motive, and proceeding from a sincere, though mistaken, concern for the interests of truth and of piety. Under this impression, the zealous polemic may verily think he is doing God service, and contending for the Faith once delivered to the Saints, when he is only cavilling for an epithet, or contending for a definition.

There are few points in which self-knowledge is more necessary, and few, perhaps, in which the acquisition of it, is more difficult, than that of distinguishing true Christian zeal, from party spirit or constitutional energy. However acutely we may trace the distinction for others, (and it is to be feared that we sometimes do so with

more acuteness than charity,) — we are too apt to take credit to ourselves, for warmth in defence of religion, when we are only warm in defence of a party or a prejudice, and zealous in identifying the truth of Scripture, with our peculiar explications. It is not only when the favourite principle is erroneous, that this eagerness in support of it, is blameable. The most important truths of Christianity, may be defended with an unchristian spirit, and other doctrines, true perhaps, but less important, may, by an elevation beyond their due proportion, be made the signals of warfare in the Church, and become instrumental to the destruction of that charity, which is not only the bond of peace, but of every Christian virtue.

It is possible that this ardour may sometimes be stimulated by an apprehension of the opposite extreme, — and a just disapprobation of that Laodicean temper which is so awfully condemned in Scripture, and which may conceal indifference or infidelity, under

the specious garb of moderation. In such a case, it may fairly be suggested, that a Christian virtue should no more be thrown away from a fear of adopting, or being supposed to adopt, its semblance only, than good money should be refused because it may be imitated ; but, on the contrary, the sterling virtue, like the sterling coin, should be the more highly prized, and carefully separated from its counterfeit.

It is by distinguishing fervency of spirit, from pertinacity of opinion, that we shall best understand the nature of true Christian moderation, and ascertain its consistency with the highest Christian zeal. It is not a surrender of our own opinions, but a toleration for those of our brethren. It is not a compromise of our peculiar principles, but a strict application of them to our own personal direction, and a liberal allowance for differences of judgment, formed perhaps, unavoidably, under different circumstances of local impression and association. It is a spirit of modesty and for-

bearance, founded upon a conviction of the universal fallibility of human nature, and a sense of our own propensity to err in every action and opinion, as well as upon the daily experience of our actual mistakes and misdoings; an experience familiar to every candid mind, and surely calculated to teach us lenity to the errors of our fellow sinners. Even in cases of moral delinquency, the sense of a common peccability is urged by the Apostle, as a motive to induce gentleness and pity towards offenders *: and if this argument be of force, in actual transgressions of the law, where the concurrence of the will gives a sinful character to the case, it must hold still more strongly in errors of opinion, which, being involuntary, may be considered rather as a disease than a crime.

But a farther argument in favour of moderation, may be drawn from the reflec-

* Galatians, vi. ver. 1.

tion, that the error may possibly be on our own side. No party can presume on an infallibility of judgment, or a monopoly of grace ; and though the way of salvation is so plain, that all who seek it honestly shall find it, yet in many things, we are all probably mistaken, as we know that in many things, we all offend. This consideration should not only restrain us from vehemently pressing our judgment upon others, but should lead us to doubt, or at least, carefully to examine, the soundness of our own decisions.

This diffidence, however, is neither necessary nor commendable, in the assertion of those fundamental truths for which the explicit word of Scripture is our warrant, and upon which our hope of salvation is built. Our conviction of these truths, cannot be too strong, nor our zeal in enforcing them, too urgent. But even here, zeal should be tempered with prudence, governed by justice, and guided by charity. “ The wrath of man worketh not the right-

cousness of God:" nor can the interests of religion, be advanced by the breach of any of its duties. It is true, that errors, in some circumstances, may be venial, and, under the influence of good intentions, may be innocent; but, with the Book of Revelation in our hands, no uprightness of intention can justify the commission of sin, or release us from its attendant condemnation. It behoves us, therefore, seriously to consider, whether the hot and intemperate zeal that leads Christians to indulge unchristian feelings, and to speak bitter things against each other, might not, under other circumstances, have incited them to more criminal acts of persecution?

If polemical zeal may thus be ranked amongst the causes of prejudice, the same quality directed to practical subjects, will probably prove the best restoration of peace. Upon this ground (not neutral, but common,) the faithful servants of Christ may meet; and while each conscientiously holds his own view of peculiar doctrines,

all may unite in urging that test of Christian fidelity, upon which there can be no dispute or dissension ; — “ If ye love me, keep my commandments.”

These observations cannot be understood to apply generally, to doctrinal, or controversial divinity ; but simply to the spirit in which points of doctrine or controversy, should be discussed. In a system where faith is made the foundation of all practice, the doctrines which are the subject of faith, must be continually prominent ; and so long as those doctrines are denied by the infidel, despised by the profane, or corrupted by the licentious, the Christian is bound to contend earnestly in their vindication ; not only when duty connects him professionally with the Church, but in whatever sphere of service, it may have pleased his Divine Master to place him.

You will think I have forgotten my promise of brevity in the discussion of the moral causes of prejudice, when I refer you

to a future letter (or possibly to more than one) for the remainder of the subject. But so it must be. I could not compress what I have yet to say, within any moderate number of pages, and shall therefore bid you farewell for the present.

Your's, very faithfully.

LETTER XI.

MORAL CAUSES OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION.

MORAL CAUSES OF PREJUDICE CONTINUED.—INTEREST.—
 UNIVERSAL INFLUENCE OF THIS MOTIVE.—ITS EXIST-
 ENCE IN VARIOUS COMBINATIONS.—ITS INFLUENCE IN
 EXCITING OPPOSITION TO A NATIONAL CHURCH.—IN
 PROMOTING ASSOCIATION WITH IT.—NECESSITY OF A
 CAREFUL EXAMINATION OF MOTIVES.—SOME CURRENT
 MISCONSTRUCTIONS AND PREJUDICES ON THIS SUBJECT.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

I AM not surprised that you should apprehend a long discussion, upon a subject so copious as that of my last letter; and I agree with you, that an attempt to enumerate fully the moral causes of prejudice in religion, would involve a dissertation upon all the corrupt passions of our nature, as well as upon the various corrupting influences from without, by which those passions are excited or inflamed. I shall not, how-

ever, enter upon a field so extensive, but confine myself to the notice of such obvious and prominent causes of prejudice, as our daily and familiar experience presents.

One of these (and perhaps I should have placed it first on account of its extensive and absorbing influence) is personal interest. This passion, or motive, call it which you please, comprehends, and combines with a number of others, and operates with a proportionate force and extent, under great varieties of character. Whether the predominant corruption be pride, or ambition, or indolence, or avarice, or vanity, self-interest is identified with the indulgence of this corruption, and self exaltation pursued as its instrument. It is a temple which man builds for the worship of his favourite idol, and under the shelter of which he sometimes practises a worse than heathen polytheism; and bows down, not indeed to the stock of a tree, but to those evil passions which are the consequences and proofs of his moral degradation, and may

become the instruments of his eternal destruction.

It is a very common mistake to attach to the indulgence of some of these passions, and to the pursuit of interest on that account, a certain character of grandeur and liberality, which we do not allow to the simple principle of selfishness, or to the love of accumulation for its own sake. Selfishness, indeed, though generally acknowledged to be the ruling principle in the world, is disclaimed by each individual for himself, or disguised under the plausible appearance of some feeling more liberal and praiseworthy; and avarice, a passion so confessedly low and contemptible, that it is never openly avowed till all lofty and liberal feeling is extinguished, insinuates itself under the specious characters of prudence, and domestic affection; the one a quality commended, the other a duty prescribed, by the Apostle, who has most indignantly stigmatized the vice which assumes their semblance. An avaricious

Christian seems indeed a perfect anomaly: yet it appears that there were such, even in the Apostolic days; and amongst the evils which Saint Paul describes as resulting from the love of money, the root (as he emphatically styles it) of all evil, we find that of having “made men err from the faith,” even (to quote the words of another Apostle,) “denying the Lord that bought them.”

But although the ostensible object of self-interest, be generally the acquisition of wealth, this object is commonly pursued only as instrumental to the attainment of others more liberal; and it is against the indulgence of selfishness, under an association with qualities less sordid and repulsive than avarice, that Christian vigilance is particularly necessary. Selfishness may be exercised even in the renunciation of wealth, if ambition or vanity be the motive; — and self interest, strictly speaking, may be as ardently pursued, in seeking the gratification of a favourite passion, as in

the rapacity of trade, or the devastation of conquest. It is, therefore, under this more general view, that we should consider selfishness as an instrument of temptation; and not always presume that we are exempt from its influence, though a kindly temper, or a liberal education, or even a general impression of Christian principle, may have preserved us from the grosser exhibitions of it.

It does not fall within our present purpose, to trace the influence of this universal passion, in producing corruptions of the Faith, though every page of Church history attests it, from the days of Saint Paul to those of Luther. Many of the doctrinal contentions and corruptions, even in the early ages, appear to have arisen from the interested views of individuals; and under the dominion of the Church of Rome, at a darker period of her history, if the doctrines of purgatory, indulgences, and supererogation, had not their origin in the same principle, they had at least a reference to the

same end, and were made instrumental to her temporal emolument and authority. It was only when self-interest became involved in the question, and the power and possessions of her clergy were endangered by the free examination of these doctrines, that the zeal of that Church was awakened against the opinions from which such practical consequences resulted; and the defection of the Reformers from her standard was more felt in the loss of tribute, than of subjects. So general, indeed, is the impression of the strength of this passion, that Luther himself has been charged with acting under its influence, in his opposition to the Romish corruptions. But such an accusation is fully refuted by the known independence and integrity of his character, as well as by the acknowledged fact, that a relinquishment of that opposition would have raised him to nearly the highest honours and emoluments in the power of the Church to bestow: and whatever reputation he lost with one side, (if reputation had been the object of his ambition,) would

have been redeemed abundantly, with the other, and the more numerous, party.

We are not now, however, to consider self-interest as a principle of corruption in the Church, but as a fomentor of prejudice; and under this view, we must be careful not to limit its operation, to the advocates of a privileged establishment. The same principle is too often the motive of popular opposition; and the independence of an endowed or national Church, is regarded as her greatest corruption. The legal provisions for her security and support, are considered as illiberal and intolerant; or, to say the least, unnecessary; and she is referred for her only legitimate defence, to the fluctuating humour of her wayward and capricious children. The Church, it is said, ought to stand upon her own strength, and her own merits, and to seek her security in the hearts of the people, and not in the arm of the magistrate. But where is the system, civil or ecclesiastical, that can unite all

hearts, convince all understandings, and reconcile all interests? Where is the system, however perfect or popular, at which ignorance will not start, or perverseness will not cavil? And if, even in the first age of the Church, it required all the weight of apostolic authority, to urge a fair provision for the preachers of the Gospel, how reasonable, now, is that legal authority which only enforces an apostolic injunction. It must be evident to any who impartially consider the subject, that the example of the primitive times, is not fairly quoted to justify the dependence of the clergy, upon the people: for though, as dissenters from the religion of the state, the first Christian preachers could not have been remunerated by law, it was clearly not left to the choice or caprice of the people, whether their ministers should be supported. Saint Paul claims his own maintenance as a positive right, though one which he generously declined to exercise; and pleads the same right on the part of his brethren, not only upon the

grounds of analogy and natural justice, but under the strong sanction of religious obligation.

I may add, that even where the claim of a compulsory provision for the clergy, has been made one of the grounds of secession from an establishment, another claim is often substituted, not less compulsory, though perhaps less revolting. Laying out of the question the religious motive, we find in almost every Christian society where a distinct ministry exists, some regular contribution imposed for its support, and guaranteed, if not by law, at least by a provision which exacts compliance, as a condition of membership with such society. The fluctuating rate of these contributions does not alter the principle; their voluntary character expires with the æra of their introduction; and while here, as in cases of civil association, there is a conventional surrender of some rights, for the better security of others more valuable; there is, likewise, a power to enforce that surrender,

as the price of the advantages attending such association.

But these considerations are often forgotten in the short-sighted policy of selfishness ; and the ultimate and substantial benefits are unheeded, under the soreness of some present restriction or deprivation. The prejudice thus excited, extends from the obnoxious institution, to the principles by which it is conceived to be supported, and all its doctrines and opinions are tried by this criterion ; — unconsciously, I admit, in many instances ; — because it is of the very nature of prejudice to mistake the principle upon which its judgment is formed ; — but it is the more necessary carefully to examine this principle ; and the test of personal interest in the question, which we employ to detect the prejudices of others, will perhaps best assist us in the discovery of our own.

If the incitements to interested prejudice in religion, may be traced even in cases apparently unconnected, or perhaps

incompatible, with personal advantage or emolument, I need hardly remark, that, under the influence of a different association, these incitements are still more powerful. In the attachment to a privileged establishment, especially if engaged by professional or domestic connection, the temptations to the indulgence of the selfish principle, are obvious ; and the danger is not lessened (paradoxical as the assertion may seem,) even by the excellence of the system which that establishment is instituted to support. I speak not here of a sordid and secular attachment to an establishment, on account of its privileges alone ; but of that complication of motives and impressions which may obscure the judgment, without palpably warping the integrity. This is, indeed, the peculiar region of prejudice ; which necessarily implies a certain rectitude of intention, and an involuntary acquiescence in error ; and is no more like the principle that actuates the merely mercenary adherent of a wealthy

Church, than the prejudice of Saint Paul, to that of Demetrius.

But I trust that we must resort to other times and churches, for examples of a character so degrading as the latter, or at least, that they are seldom to be found in our own. At all events, these remarks are inapplicable, and would be useless, to persons of this description. Before the ministry can be exercised, or viewed merely as a secular trade, all practical sense of piety must be discarded ; and the shades of prejudice will be imperceptible, or uninteresting, to him who, perhaps, includes amongst them, the most awful and unquestionable truths of religion. Even if infidelity be not the origin of this profanation, it will at least be its inevitable result ; and he who at first only proposed to reconcile the service of God and of Mammon, will find that he cannot serve two masters, and be reduced to make his choice between the God of the world, and of the Gospel.

Yet, as a certain connection with present interest, is inseparable from the very nature of an establishment, it behoves the conscientious Christian to examine what influence this motive may have upon his attachments, and whether he would be as ready to share the afflictions of his Church, as he is to support her ascendancy. If he does not shrink from such a question, and can answer in the affirmative, without self-deception or partiality, his zeal will be either exempt from prejudice, or his prejudice will be free from guilt. But it is not, perhaps, so safe, to trust this question to a formal process of self-examination upon the abstract principle, as to try it by the more general but impartial test of conduct; to enquire, whether the expression of zeal for the favourite system, is regulated by a fair estimate of the importance of the subjects to which it is applied, and softened by that spirit of universal charity that can honour the faithful worshipper of Christ in every branch of his church, — and jealously to analyze every action and principle, in which

there is a temptation, or a tendency, to mercenary or secular motives.

If this vigilance be peculiarly necessary to the members of a privileged church, it is equally incumbent on them, not to suffer the fear of uncharitable constructions, to restrain them in the expression of opinions which they have carefully scanned, and honestly adopted; and it is perhaps one of the severest trials of the conscientious minister of an establishment, when duty calls him into the field of public controversy, that in defending the most sacred principles of his faith, he is supposed to be labouring for his temporal emolument; and in guarding the bulwarks of a national church, by which he holds that faith to be best secured, he is too often accused of contending for the possessions of a privileged order. This is, indeed, so common a prejudice, that some of the noblest defences of Christianity, have been depreciated on account of their ecclesiastical origin; and the very circumstance that gives the highest value to every other literary pro-

duction, viz. that it is the work of a person professionally acquainted with the subject, is here urged as a ground of discredit. I suspect that much of the speculative infidelity amongst us, has arisen from this prejudice ; and that no small share of the prevalent disaffection to the establishment, in many who retain the profession, and the faith, of the Gospel, may be traced to the same source. To either of these classes, it might fairly be suggested, that, whatever may be the responsibility of individuals for their motives, these motives have nothing to do with the soundness of their cause, or the strength of their arguments ; and to the latter class, it might be urged as a rule of Christian duty, that unworthy motives should never be ascribed, where the case will admit a fairer interpretation.

But it would swell my letter to a volume, to follow this tortuous passion through all its branches ; and I have said more than enough to prove its claim to a prominent place, in our enumeration of the moral causes

of prejudice. It should, indeed, be allowed the precedence ; not only as being most universal in its influence, but most subtle in its disguises, and closely adherent to the human mind, under every variety of outward situation ; and I need hardly add, that a conviction of this powerful and pervading influence, should render it an object of perpetual jealousy and vigilance, to the Christian of every rank and profession.

Some other points yet remain to be noticed, but I must reserve them for my next letter ; in which I hope to bring this part of our inquiry, to a close.

Yours, &c. &c.

LETTER XII.

MORAL CAUSES OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION.

MORAL CAUSES OF PREJUDICE CONTINUED. — IGNORANCE. — GENERAL IGNORANCE A COMMON CAUSE OF THE SUCCESS OF INFIDEL WRITINGS. — PARTIAL IGNORANCE A CAUSE OF PREJUDICE IN RELIGION. — INDOLENCE. — DISPROPORTIONATE ATTENTION TO SUBORDINATE POINTS. — PASSION, OR PREPOSSESSION, ANOTHER CAUSE OF PREJUDICE. — APPLICABLE EITHER TO DOCTRINE OR TO PERSONS. — DOCTRINAL PREJUDICE THE RESULT OF PERSONAL PARTIALITIES. — CONSEQUENT JEALOUSIES ; — INFLUENCE OF THESE IMPRESSIONS UPON THE JUDGMENT. — OPPOSITE EFFECTS OF PREJUDICE. — MORAL INJURY ARISING FROM THE ABOVE CAUSES. — INFLUENCE OF PRIDE IN PROMOTING PREJUDICES OF PASSION.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

WHEN I include ignorance amongst the moral causes of prejudice in religion, you must not understand me as undervaluing the simplicity of humble and confiding piety ; which, though not skilled in the subtilties of controversy, is nevertheless wise unto salvation ; and though incapable

of deep abstraction or precise definition, is in a happier, and perhaps a safer state, under the simple study of the divine record, and the sole guidance of the divine grace.

This state, however, is rarely attainable in an advanced stage of society, or under an extensive (though unequal) diffusion of general improvement. Ignorance here, is not sufficient to secure the mind from false impressions, but is the very medium through which they are effectually conveyed. For proof of this, I need only refer you to the success of those profane and licentious publications which are daily issuing from the press, and which, under the presumption of popular ignorance, and veiled in the plausible disguise of patriotism, are undermining the faith and the morals of our people, and aiming at the subversion of all our civil, as well as sacred institutions. It is, perhaps, one of the effects of the fatal transgression of our first parent, and a penalty annexed to the curiosity in which it originated, that while the "knowledge of

good" has become an advantage of slow and difficult attainment, an acquaintance with evil is spontaneously, and almost insensibly, contracted in the intercourse with every object around us ; and thus the gaping curiosity that leads a simple mechanic, to follow a seditious mob, or attend at the reading of a seditious or blasphemous journal, though not perhaps a guilty feeling in itself, is the instrument to open his mind to every malignant passion, and to stimulate him (through the association it produces), to every atrocious act.

Where infidelity is thus engrafted upon general ignorance, it is not only adopted as a prejudice, but cherished as a passion ; and is so interwoven with other passions excited by the same declamation, that the propagation of it, becomes identified with every ulterior advantage which artifice has suggested as its result.

Hence it follows, that when infidelity has reached the lower classes, it spreads with

the rapidity of a pestilence ; and, as, in cases of bodily contagion, the virulence of the disease is increased by the want of those means of amelioration which skill and wealth can supply, — this moral plague, when it rages amongst the poor and uneducated, is aggravated by the absence of those counteracting restraints, which, in higher life, prevent its more pernicious and palpable consequences, — and which, though they do not render it less fatal to the individual, certainly diminish its danger to the community. Yet even here, (to pursue the analogy,) the infection, if not radically checked, will be progressive, however slow in its operation, and will acquire, in the course of its descent, all the destructive violence of accelerated motion.

But this general ignorance, which leaves the mind destitute of a defence against the arts of infidelity, or the declamations of sedition, cannot be included amongst the causes of prejudice in religion. It is, in fact, a cause of prejudice against religion altogether ; and one which can be effectually

removed only by such a system of national education, as shall produce at least a preponderance of sound principle and cultivated judgment, in the people.

The state of mind to which I would refer, in connection with our present enquiry, is that partial ignorance which is compatible with considerable advantages of education, or may exist even in combination with the soundest religious opinions. In the former case, especially where religion has not formed a distinct and prominent branch of instruction, this ignorance may be the result of an indolent acquiescence in the tenets of a church, through the partiality of early impression, and a reluctance, either from this partiality, or from indolence, to bring those tenets to the test of a serious examination. Here, whatever may be the excellence of the system, the adoption of it has obviously proceeded, in a considerable degree, from prejudice; and the less the understanding has been excited or exercised in the reception of opinions, the less will it

be inclined to doubt, or to discuss them ; and the greater, consequently, will be the indisposition to tolerate any dissent from the favourite principles.

Where this careless acquiescence in an hereditary profession, is the result of a general indifference to religion, (and you will observe that practical indifference may exist without speculative disbelief,) there is often as little acquaintance with the doctrines of one church, as with those of another. Some prominent ceremonial distinction, or some doctrine which has formed the turning point of difference from other churches, is at once adopted as a palladium of faith, and applied as a test of orthodoxy. This favourite post is guarded with all the pertinacity of prejudice, while general principles are neglected, and the more important points of comparison with other systems, are overlooked or misunderstood ; or rather, no comparison is instituted, and while the impressions of early association are maintained by habit, and strengthened by pride, the

prejudices of early hostility are confirmed by the same cause, and irritated by the same passion.

But under the present diffusion of literary and religious improvement, ignorance of this description, is happily becoming more rare ; and, except in cases of palpable or latent unbelief, (with which our enquiry has no concern,) it seldom happens that some subsequent efforts are not made to verify and establish the hereditary creed, and to fix it upon the firm ground of rational assent and conviction. To those who have been educated in the principles of a Scriptural Church, such a process is at once the best preservative of faith, and the best defence against prejudice. In the privilege of building the demonstration on the broad and solid basis of God's word, the most certain pledge is given for the general soundness of the system ; and while the cardinal principles are fixed upon this foundation, a gentle and tolerant, though decided, adherence to circumstantial distinctions, will not close the mind against that comprehensive charity

which embraces every fellow Christian as a brother. But where the order of this process is inverted, and the polity of the Church is more sedulously studied than her principles, the preponderance given to such distinctions, must create at least a tendency to prejudice, in the minds of those who oppose, as well as of those who maintain them; and a disinclination in both parties, to examine the system from which they have resolved to dissent, will be at once the result of this prejudice, and the cause of that partial and imperfect information, which is so fertile a source of mutual misapprehension and jealousy. It does not, I confess, appear very philosophical to refer to the same principle as cause and effect; yet this double character might be easily proved, and partial inquiry, shown to be the consequence, as it is generally the foundation, of prejudice.

Another circumstance to which we may also refer, as alternately the cause and the consequence of this tendency to prejudice in religion, or which, perhaps, we might

better state as the essence of prejudice itself, is a propensity to regulate the opinions rather by passion, than by reason ; and to submit the judgment to the influence of some arbitrary prepossession or dislike. To this source, may be traced much of the prejudice that actuates the warm followers of contending sects, with whom a name is sometimes a sufficient subject of division, and even an entrance into the hostile camp, though but as a pacificator or a neutral, a ground of jealousy and suspicion. Whether we consider this prejudice as exercising an attractive or a repulsive power, as attaching us to one party, or alienating us from another, it may be described in the same terms, and deduced from the same origin; viz. the indulgence of prepossessions unsupported and unexamined by reason.

These prepossessions may be considered as relating either to doctrine, or to persons. And here I must premise, that the doctrine may be true, and the person respectable, while the former may be the subject of extravagant zeal, and the latter of excessive

veneration. It is, in fact, chiefly in this neglect of proportion in its judgments, that the influence of passion in religion, is distinguishable ; — in a vehement assertion of true, but comparatively unimportant, principles, and an identification of those principles, with the knowledge of fundamental truth, or the possession of vital piety. A false principle may, indeed, be adopted with passion, and defended with pertinacity ; but where there is not a natural imbecility of mind, it will seldom be permanently retained in opposition to evidence and reason, unless under the influence of some local disadvantages, or of some corrupt and interested motives.

By prepossession, in its application to doctrine, I mean not an adherence to those salutary impressions imbibed by education, confirmed by mature judgment, and retained upon conviction ; but an eager tenacity of adherence to certain opinions, not so much for their truth or evidence, as from a capricious and unaccountable partiality, conceived we know not how, and founded upon

we know not what. A moderate acquaintance with the history of religious controversy, may furnish us with instances of this partiality : where the precipitance that has prevented the exercise of the judgment, in the adoption of opinions, has led to a proportionate vehemence of expression, and deficiency of argument, in their defence.

There is, however, a much more common form of doctrinal prejudice, derived from those personal predilections which affection and association may create ; or from that confidence which may be excited by the admiration of eminent learning or sanctity. To this latter source may, perhaps, be traced many of the divisions which have arisen in the Church ; and if it had not become a principle of dissension even in the apostolic days, its tendency seems at least to have been foreseen by Saint Paul, when he so earnestly exhorted the Corinthian converts, against ascribing their faith to their respective teachers. It is, I confess, extremely difficult to study a religious theory, and especially where the influence of emi-

ment genius, is corroborated by acknowledged piety, without assigning the understanding more implicitly to human guidance, than we are willing to own even to ourselves; and a modest and candid mind may be impelled to their resignation, by a diffidence of its own strength, and a desire of abler assistance and direction.

But whatever may be the ground of submission in such a case, its consequences are obviously unfavourable to freedom of judgment. A reference to the opinions of the favourite teacher, enters insensibly into every discussion; and habitual partiality confirms the undistinguishing acquiescence, which originated, perhaps, in respect for his character, or admiration of his talents. A proportionate jealousy of other authorities, especially if they do not entirely coincide with the chosen director, is a frequent and almost an inseparable attendant of this partiality; and an implicit and confiding assent in the one case, involves an indiscriminate and suspicious opposition in the other.

In the case of rival teachers in the church, (I mean not any intentional rivalry, but that attitude of emulation, which the prejudice of their followers unavoidably produces between the preachers of different schools,) we find the influence of personal prepossession changing apparently the form and character of the doctrine ; and the very same positions canvassed with pertinacious jealousy, which would have been received from a different quarter, with implicit respect. We hear, perhaps, the charge of legality thrown upon the sermons of Scott and Cooper, when preached from pulpits to which the epithet of orthodox has been reproachfully applied ; and doctrinal expositions delivered from the same pulpits, (which from the lips of an evangelical preacher, would have been received with confidence and applause,) if advanced by one to whom prejudice has denied the evangelical character, either rejected as altogether unscriptural, or, if their soundness cannot be denied, at most received as insidious or enforced concessions.

This is not an exaggerated statement. It is a simple reference to what must fall under the observation of any who attend occasionally, the preaching of the different schools, and hear the comments of both parties. I am far, however, from thinking that all the prejudice of this kind, is on the evangelical side: on the contrary, I think the respect of persons in forming the doctrinal judgment, quite as strong, if not perhaps stronger, upon the other; though its influence is somewhat different, the prejudice of attraction commonly operating in the former class, and that of repulsion in the latter.

One unhappy consequence of the classification of preachers (if I may call it so,) which has resulted from this prejudice, is an unwillingness to “receive the truth in the love of it;” a habit of measuring the doctrine by the person; and a facility of discovering, or of imagining, peculiar views or errors in the preacher, and giving them such a prominence, as to destroy the effect

of the more sound and general instruction. It is the natural tendency of controversy, to produce a critical and captious spirit ; and hence we often find, in polemical times, more attention employed to detect an erroneous proposition, or to mark an unguarded expression, than to understand the preacher's general system, or to apply his exhortations to the heart and conscience. It requires, indeed, a considerable progress in the Christian temper, as well as a comparative exemption from personal prejudice, (for a complete exemption is probably not to be attained,) to sit as humble disciples under the ministry ; or, while we try the doctrine fairly, by the word of God, to receive cordially, all instruction that bears this impress, and to sacrifice the indulgence of private partiality, or of critical taste, to the advancement in Christian edification.

If the influence of the attractive prejudice, has produced, on the one hand, an implicit submission to human guidance, and invested some favourite teacher, with the infallibility which the church disclaims for her public

judgment, the repulsive prejudice is not less injurious, though, (as I have already remarked,) somewhat different in its operation. The effect of this prejudice, is a general disposition to controvert whatever opinion is supposed to be held by the person against whom it has conceived any displeasure; and it will sometimes go so far, as even to modify the expression of an acknowledged principle, rather than seem to acquiesce in any part of the system of an opponent.

Another exhibition of the repulsive prejudice, is an unwillingness to enter into personal intercourse and acquaintance, for no better reason than because we apprehend a difference of opinion. This mutual estrangement not only precludes any fair explanation between the parties so divided, but leaves each exposed to every misconception that the malice of a common enemy may suggest, while it deprives them of the privilege of being heard in their own defence; and, as an object of personal fear or antipathy, is rendered more formidable by

obscurity or indistinctness, the reluctance to approach the objects of spiritual alarm confirms the prejudice which credulity or ignorance had adopted, and, by an application to personal character, or an arbitrary imputation of motives, creates a real ground of jealousy and irritation.

It would be easy to trace more minutely, the connection of these personal prejudices, whether of attachment or of dislike, with the prejudices of opinion ; but it is unnecessary to do more than point out the principle, and refer you for the result, to your own observation, whether your intercourse has been entirely with the warm advocates of one party, or occasionally with those of another. This is, however, a subject of so much delicacy, and, at the present period, of so much division, that it is difficult to enter freely into the discussion of it, without aggravating the prejudices we are most desirous to assuage ; and we shall derive more personal improvement from the enquiry, by turning our attention to the origin of our own

opinions, and examining what share those prejudices may have had in their production.

But it is to the moral operation of passion in religion, that we should particularly advert in an enquiry of this nature ; — To its influence in contracting benevolence, — in producing censorious judgment, — in opening the mind to the reception of every idle tale, and of every uncharitable prejudice ; — throwing the torch of discord into the temple of peace, and leading the servants of a God of mercy, to kindle the flame of persecution, upon earth, which, in defiance of an evangelical reproof, they dare not call down from heaven.

It is not, indeed, in the excitement of this active and palpable hostility, that the influence of passion operates upon the members of the same church and community : and particularly where the Scriptures are freely circulated and read, their benevolent principle will so far obtain, as to raise at least a nominal barrier against

every species of personal coercion in religion. It is important, therefore, to recollect, that, however liberal may be the principles of our Church, or the laws of our country, we virtually desert those principles, and infringe those laws, when we indulge an acrimonious and uncharitable spirit ; and that it is a very dangerous self-deception, to take credit for forbearance, as a personal virtue, when we do not exhibit the only proof of it, that circumstances have left in our own choice.

It is not, however, only under the prosperous circumstances of legal establishment and ascendancy, that an intolerant spirit can be exercised, or a propensity to censorious judgment, indulged. There is, perhaps, more incitement to both, in the irritation created, by a sense of personal depression, or an inequality of public privilege ; and though the obstacles to the active indulgence of this spirit are stronger here, than in the former case, its essential influence may pervade the whole character, and

tinge every surrounding object with the jaundiced colouring of prejudice.

Before we close this part of our enquiry, I must add a few words upon the subject of pride, with which we commenced it.

I have already briefly adverted to the operation of this principle, in producing the prejudices of opinion. Its effect in producing prejudices of passion, and influencing, not only the judgment, but the moral temper and conduct, we may easily trace, too often in our own hearts, if not in our intercourse with the society around us. I have noticed the power of association and example, as amongst the incidental causes of prejudice in religion; but as causes, innocent in themselves, and often beneficial in their moral operation. But where this power is opposed by pride and personal jealousy, a counter prejudice is produced, and the clearest principles and most laudable practice are discredited by their casual association with some party feeling or peculiarity. Hence, I think, arises, (where

it does not spring simply from levity of character or intentional disregard to religion,) the propensity to meet the extreme of scrupulousness, with the opposite extreme of relaxation, and to neglect the restrictions of prudence, as the most effectual mode of resisting the extravagancies of enthusiasm.

A still worse effect, however, is produced by this principle, when it revolts against reformation which the judgment and conscience equally approve, because they are proposed or originated by an inferior, in age, in rank, or in condition, — when the well-meant zeal of a junior member of a family irritates the prejudice which it labours to remove, and the mind is resolutely turned away from every serious and useful contemplation, lest it should be too much engrossed with what the word of truth emphatically calls the “one thing needful!” — when the strictness of an inferior member of a profession, is stigmatized with the name of severity or enthusiasm, if not, with the still worse charge of hypocrisy, — and an

obedience to the apostolic injunction to be "instant in season and out of season" in the inculcation of spiritual instruction, is interpreted as a symptom of disaffection to the establishment, and zeal for the diffusion of sectarian opinions, — and when, under the influence of this impression, an association is produced in the mind, between orthodoxy in church principle, and an allowed and habitual indulgence in secular amusements and pursuits. This prejudice has obviously, no necessary connection with any doctrinal points in dispute ; and however innocent or indifferent such pursuits may be considered in themselves, the serious friend to religion (be his doctrines what they may), will feel them to be inexpedient, and, therefore, no longer innocent, if they occupy time which has been devoted by a solemn engagement, to more important purposes, and lessen the respect of the people for their ministers, though it were acknowledged to be only by offending their prejudices. These are effects which lead directly to a moral deterioration, including not only the propensity to uncharitable judgment, to

which I have adverted above, but a wilful neglect of the means of improvement, through a capricious contempt for the instrument; and a light estimation, if not a virtual dereliction, of a very awful and responsible character.

In noticing the prejudice which sometimes identifies professional strictness, with a tendency to sectarian principles, I cannot but observe, that such a prejudice, (the most dangerous, perhaps, to the church, and certainly founded upon a very false estimate of her real discipline and spirit,) would be best counteracted by exhibiting this strictness under a different association; and wresting from the dissenters, if, indeed, they possessed it, the palm of superior devotedness.

Far from my heart be the treacherous thought of wounding the church through the sides of her ministers, or intending to convey a reproach, where I would only offer an humble and affectionate suggestion. At-

tached to their venerable body, by very extensive friendship and connection, I can bear a confident and cordial testimony to their general excellence; and I am the more anxious that this excellence should be duly estimated and respected. Strong as I believe and know the clergy to be, in learning, in morals, in conscious integrity, and vital, practical, religion, I would urge them to exertion, to vigilance, to unanimity, in support of that faith which they conscientiously prefer, and to which they are solemnly devoted. I would suggest, that the attitude of defence which they have hitherto thought it sufficient to assume against the encroachments of the foes of the establishment, will not resist the combined and powerful attacks of sectarian jealousy and infidel hostility, if they do not intrench themselves in the strong ground of Christian energy, and catholic unity, and primitive discipline, and pastoral zeal. I would remind them, that they are the guardians of a city set upon a hill, and that upon their discharge of their awful and arduous duty,

the eyes of their country are fixed, and the fate of their church may possibly be suspended.

Though I have touched very reluctantly, upon a point, connected so intimately with our general subject, that it could not fairly be omitted, I am not sure that you will acquit me of presumption in entering *at all* upon what may, perhaps, be considered as a question exclusively professional : but the mouse could gnaw the net that enclosed the lion ;—and a service may not be the less effectual, nor eventually the less acceptable, for the obscurity of the quarter from whence it proceeds.

Our speculation upon the moral causes of prejudice, has led me farther than I expected, but not half so far as the subject admits. I hope, however, that I have said enough to lead you to observe the general operation of these causes, and to make that personal application of your experience, which will best secure you from participating in their influence.

I shall close this inquiry, with a few observations upon the evil consequences of prejudice; but these I must reserve for a future letter.

Your's, most truly.

LETTER XIII.

*SOME OF THE CONSEQUENCES OF PREJUDICE IN
RELIGION.*

CONSEQUENCES OF RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE. — DIVISION. — RIVALSHIP. — EFFECT OF CONTROVERSIAL HABITS. — ACCUMULATION OF QUESTIONS. — SCEPTICISM. — LOSS OF TIME, IF SUBTRACTED FROM PRACTICAL OBJECTS. — PREJUDICE OF CONNECTING RELIGION WITH MEDIOCRITY OF TALENT. — COMPATIBILITY OF PIETY WITH GENIUS. — PECULIAR ADVANTAGES IN THEIR ASSOCIATION. — ABUSE OF GENIUS A CAUSE OF THE PREJUDICE AGAINST IT. — THIS PREJUDICE ACTED UPON BY INFIDELS. — EXPENSE OF INTELLECT IN UNIMPORTANT CONTROVERSIES, ANOTHER SOURCE OF PREJUDICE. — OBSTRUCTIONS TO CHARITY. — SEPARATION IN PIOUS AND CHARITABLE OFFICES. — OTHER EFFECTS OF PREJUDICE. — UNION THE BEST SECURITY OF THE CHURCH. — CONCLUSION.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

OF the effects of religious prejudice, I shall here only notice the temper of mind which it creates, and the injurious consequences to the church, which that temper necessarily produces. Amongst these, I need hardly mention division as the most prominent ;

the formation of parties within the church; and the infusion of a spirit of jealousy, separating these parties from each other. In this description (I have already said) I do not include essential differences of doctrine which afford a reasonable ground of separation; and under which, the charge of schism or unnecessary division is inapplicable. Neither do I mean to refer here, to those ritual scruples which have occasioned an avowed and open secession, and the formation of a distinct society; but to the petty contentions and emulations arising between members of the same church, from that mutual estrangement which precludes explanation, or from an attachment to some favourite opinion, party, or leader.

The existence of this division, none can question, who observe the present state of our church, in large and populous cities; where adjoining parishes will sometimes exhibit rival congregations; and a stranger who attends occasionally in each, for the comfort of public worship and the benefit of Christian instruction, will find himself

puzzled with verbal discrepancies and controversial allusions, or addressed alternately in the language of different and hostile commentators. He will hear antinomianism imputed to the advocate of divine grace, and Pelagian presumption, to the teacher of responsibility ; and however ardently both may disclaim, or how little soever either may deserve, the imputations, he will find them ascribed to each of these teachers, by the prejudiced followers of the other, upon no better evidence than report or conjecture ; for neither party will ascertain the justice of the charge, by a fair examination. Or, if some one doctrine be the object of partiality, the merits of the preacher will be estimated by his view of this doctrine ; and as no general excellence will atone for its omission, no other omission will be perceived, where the favourite point is prominent.

In considering the consequences of this spirit of jealous emulation, whether as exhibited in personal enmities, or controversial disputes, I shall chiefly advert to its moral

effects in obstructing charity and practical religion. Its influence in disturbing, and eventually dividing the church against herself, might be incidentally traced in our history ; but would involve us in too long a discussion, and would not (I think) be quite applicable to our present object.

One effect of this controversial spirit, when it is engaged in contending for inferior or indifferent points, is to avert the mind from truths of more importance ; or, at least, to diminish their value, though it cannot weaken their evidence ; as a cloud obscures the sun from the view of the traveller, though it does not entirely obstruct his light.

Another, and a still more dangerous consequence, is the application of disproportionate zeal to the speculative parts of religion, and the neglect of that practical and active pursuit of it, which alone can make it instrumental to our salvation. Christianity is not only the rule, but the business of life : it is a conflict ; a watch ; a

race ; it requires the devotion of time, diligence, and talents, of every power and faculty of the soul. It is a battle that must be fought ; a race that must be run ; and if the whole time allowed us to reach the goal, be spent in disputing the way, however actively our talents may be exercised, they will obviously be employed with little benefit to ourselves.

That such must be too often the case of polemical contentions, will be evident to any who consider them in their application to the two great talents of time and intellect. With respect to the first, they not only ingross it insensibly, as most other avocations do, which distract us from the pursuit of religion, but imperiously demand it as a tribute to the service of religion itself ; and become doubly dangerous from their plausibility. They divert the mind from the awful and practical question, "What must we do to be saved ?" and so swell the task of study and enquiry, and raise, in the solution of every difficulty, so many new subjects of dispute, that a plain

understanding cannot comprehend, and a moderate life can hardly comprise them. Once launched upon the boundless ocean of controversy, every succeeding wave wafts us farther from the harbour of peace ; the cloud, at first no larger than a man's hand, swells till it overspreads the heavens ; till all effort at extrication, is at last given up in despair, and, perhaps, the truth of revelation itself is involved in the incredulous suspension to which the rival systems have reduced the weary and hopeless student.

This is, indeed, a dark picture of the close of a controversial life ; yet I might refer you to some melancholy proofs of its fidelity ; and show you the determined and captious polemic, spending his best years in disputing the creed of his opponents, and at last discarding his own.

But even where the belief of revelation is unimpaired, or, perhaps, the conviction of some of its abstract truths, confirmed by a controversial examination, if the great object of spiritual and practical improvement

be not hereby promoted, it is but a plausible misapplication of time and industry. The Christian character must either advance or decline; and every employment that does not improve, has a tendency to impair it.

Laying out of the question, however, the moral effects resulting from polemical contentions, the mere loss of time is in itself an injury which virtually includes every other :
“ When we lose that,” (says a pious writer,)
“ we suffer an accumulative prejudice ; for-
“ feit our rights in reversion, as well as our
“ possessions ; our capacities, as well as
“ our enjoyments. If the night overtake
“ us,” (he adds,) “ it matters not how we
“ are stored with instruments of action,
“ since they all at once, then become use-
“ less. Death fixes us in the posture it finds
“ us, and so presents us to judgment ; and
“ I would know of the most eager contender,
“ whether he would not choose to be found
“ with his hands stretched out in prayer to
“ God, or alms to the poor, rather than
“ dealing blows amongst his fellow-servants ?

“ If he would, then certainly 'tis his concern to put himself into that form he would then appear in, and so to husband his little span of time, as may stand him in stead, when time shall be no more.”

I have elsewhere remarked upon the injury done to religion, by associating it with narrow genius, and confined information. This prejudice (resulting, probably, from the general application of some scriptural expressions descriptive of personal humility, and of the abasement of all human reason in the presence of that Divine Being whose wisdom is infinite,) has been adopted by some excellent Christians, who might be cited as eminent examples in its refutation. The most acute reasoning has been urged in the depreciation of reason, and distinguished genius has been exerted, in the praise of that mediocrity of intellect which is supposed to be the best preservative of religious sobriety and submission. It is, indeed, a beautiful and encouraging description of our faith, that “ the wayfaring man, though a fool, shall not err therein ;” that

“ it giveth light to the blind, and understanding unto the simple ;” and that all who are honestly desirous to submit to the divine will, “ shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God.” Yet it no where appears that knowledge is necessarily an obstruction to faith, or genius, an impediment to devotion ; but rather, from the deep responsibility attached to the abuse of these gifts, that in their right application, they are eminently conducive to both. In fact, every subject on which the intellect can be exercised, may be made instrumental to the advancement in religion. The study of nature, of philosophy, or of secular history, will furnish new proofs of the divine wisdom, power, and goodness ; and every apparent anomaly or imperfection in the frame of the visible, or the government of the moral world, will be removed by the book of revelation :—“ What I do, thou knowest not now, but thou shalt know hereafter.”

It is not, perhaps, quite prudent to refer to the influence of constitutional feeling, in

the excitement of devotion : and it is certainly dangerous to trust it as a criterion of spiritual safety. Yet there is a certain vivacity of temperament, commonly attendant upon genius, which, as it is most fatal in its misdirection, is, in its right use, proportionally beneficial. The bright and fertile imagination, that forms for the man of genius, an ideal world, where beauty, and virtue, and honour, and love, triumph over vice, and interest, and selfishness, may find its noblest and most delightful exercise, in the contemplation of that new world, “wherein dwelleth righteousness;”—where, under this comprehensive epithet, are included all that is good, and great, and beautiful, beyond what “eye hath seen, or ear heard, or it hath entered into the heart of man to conceive.” And while his highest capacities of intellectual enjoyment, are here filled and surpassed, his tenderest sensibilities are engaged by the grateful sense of his own concern in the stupendous scene ; to which the filial tie that binds him to the Father of the universe, gives a deeper and a dearer interest, while the moral contin-

gencies upon which his hopes are suspended, animate him to the performance of those daily and necessary duties, which, to his temper, under other principles, would be wearisome and tasteless, if not repulsive.

But the noblest powers are most destructive, in their perversion ; and we read that the first apostacy began in the highest rank of created spirits. And hence, perhaps, it is, that the great enemy of mankind often selects his victims from the choicest of the flock, and forms his instruments, of that precious metal which seemed most susceptible of a heavenly temper, and fitted for the defence of the everlasting kingdom. “A noble mind overthrown,” by bodily disease or affliction, is a melancholy object ; but such a mind, enthralled by infidel sophistry and enslaved by ungovernable passions,—ever grasping at the cup of ideal delight, and finding it vapid and distasteful,—knowing only the irritabilities of genius; and the miseries of sensibility,—enjoying nothing here, and expecting nothing hereafter, and living apparently only to diffuse the malig-

nant infection that corrodes it,—such a mind is a spectacle to afflict the firmest heart, and to lay the glories of human intellect in the dust, in humble dependence on that Divine Guide, without whose grace, all wisdom is folly.

The presumption that genius is unfavourable to piety, to which the instances of its unhappy misapplication (as well as the other circumstance I have mentioned), have, probably, given rise, is a very dangerous prejudice, as it leads to an association that lessens the present dignity and value of religion, by representing it as the privilege of dull and heavy spirits, or of minds incapable of a free and bold expansion. Few men love to enrol themselves in the latter class; and those who considered religion as the distinctive livery of dullness, would be easily led to discard a faith which exposed them to such an imputation. Indeed the influence of this prejudice sufficiently appears in the epithet of *freethinking*, attached by malice and presumption, to infidel speculations; a connection which a thought-

less adoption of the phrase by some advocates of religion, has confirmed, and which has, perhaps, done more to undermine religious principle, in unguarded and ingenuous minds, than any other artifice of infidelity.

But this prejudice seems to derive a stronger sanction from a circumstance more immediately connected with our subject, — the management of polemical divinity, and the occasional misemployment of great abilities, on inferior or unprofitable questions, which has been sometimes observed even in the friends and defenders of Revelation. It is an old remark, that heresies and contentions in the church, have commonly originated with acute and ingenious persons; and to this impression, may partly be traced the prejudice we are now considering. But, whether this be true or not, it is certain that such persons are often most interested by speculative or controversial questions, in religion, and inclined to devote to them, the greater share of their attention; while the more practical and de-

votional parts are left to advocates of inferior capacity, as if they afforded not sufficient scope for the exercise and exhibition of talent. I have heard this objection made to much of our controversial divinity ; and though I do not think it generally applicable, I cannot, in some instances, dispute it.

It is obvious that religion must be doubly injured by such a mode of defence ; and that while its opponents will have some plausible grounds for representing it as a source of discord and animosity, or at best a scheme of abstract and questionable doctrines, some of its friends may possibly be led to under-rate the importance of truths which they see thus separated from their practical consequences.

This distinction has given no small countenance to the prejudice which would separate piety from genius ; a prejudice equally injurious and unjust ; and, in fact, refuted by anticipation (if I may say so), in those sublime strains of Scripture, which, “ even as human compositions,” have extorted

from the infidel critic, the tribute of almost unqualified applause ; which have furnished the most admired secular compositions, with their choicest imagery and tenderest pathos, and whose sacred stores have been unsparingly rifled, even by those corruptors of the public taste and morals, who, with a profane and insolent scorn, would represent them as the deceptions of priestcraft, or the dreams of ignorance and fatuity. There is, indeed, a double meanness in this species of plagiarism ; and a writer who valued his reputation, would probably be deterred from resorting to it, if the confidence that many of his readers were but slightly acquainted with the source from whence he drew those ornaments of his performance, did not render the theft as safe as it was inviting.

The effect of prejudice, in obstructing charity between Christians, was the next point which I proposed to notice ; but this has been so often touched upon in my former letters, that it may now be dismissed very briefly.

The personal jealousies which result from speculative division, may, indeed, be softened by gentleness of constitutional temper, or subdued by Christian grace. But on speculative questions, there is so natural a propensity to identify persons with opinions, that, as long as religious differences exist, such jealousies will probably accompany them. In other cases, personal enmity is simply the impression of passion, excited by some actual or imaginary offence, and is naturally softened, as the ebullition subsides, or removed, as the gradual operation of the judgment restores the mind to strength and sobriety. But where, by the speculative nature of the question, the foundation of the dispute is laid in the understanding, the judgment is (as it were) retained as counsel for the passions, and we cherish our animosity, as the guardian of our principles. We cautiously shrink from a friendly association with all whose opinions are supposed to differ from our own, and sometimes refuse to meet, even in what we all acknowledge to be points of common duty. Nay, we bring duty itself to

sanction our divisions, and plead apostolic or canonical precept, for a jealous estrangement from our brethren, and a determined refusal to partake with them, in holy offices and charitable undertakings ; and while we reciprocally apply to each other, the most severe imputations, and thus confirm our own prejudices, (of enmity, as well as of attachment,) we not only excite the hostile prejudice of those who may differ from us in the interpretation of the Christian doctrines, but incur the ridicule, and expose our holy religion to the contempt, of the infidel, who sees even the propagation of the gospel of peace obstructed, or urged in the spirit of contention.

A few words more, only, I shall add, upon the injury arising from prejudice, as it leads to the allowance of questionable means and instruments, for the advancement of a favourite object. I need not refer to the pious frauds recorded in ecclesiastical history, (which, if they did not originate with the division of parties in the church, certainly owed to it, their subsequent increase,)

nor to the catalogue of atrocious crimes which the annals of bigotry exhibit. Of these, through the mercy of God, our land is comparatively innocent ; and the exercise of intentional fraud or cruelty, in the support of religion, would be indignantly denounced by every Christian, of every party. But I fear that we cannot so triumphantly disclaim those minor offences against charity and integrity, which party zeal produces. By a harsh and precipitate estimate of character, on both sides, we irritate prejudice into personal enmity ; and by a disingenuous management of controversy, contending for victory, rather than for truth, we not only obstruct any general restoration of peace and unity of judgment, but raise a barrier against our own convictions ; and engage our pride to the permanent support of principles or practices which we have once defended, however conscience, or more mature reflection, may urge us to retract a hasty and peremptory decision. How short would be the process of religious controversy, if truth were the sole and universal object ! truth, sought in charity, and

applied to practice, and used as a touchstone to detect the sophistry of our own hearts, or the deceptions of our great spiritual enemy, rather than to expose the verbal or speculative errors of a polemical opponent !

If many of the questions that now divide us, are not, in substance, essential to Christianity, they may, with respect to their mode of discussion, be made essentially injurious to it. The diligence thus employed in detecting and disclosing the fallacies or mistakes of a hostile controversialist, if subtracted from that which ought to have been directed against the great enemy of the faith, may lead to the destruction of the sanctuary which it proposes to defend ; and while the several schemes of religion are earnestly struggling for pre-eminence, and the advocate of each, as peremptorily condemning all others, as if it were not only his belief, but his interest, that none should be right but himself, that which alone is true religion, may be destroyed ; the power of godliness may be lost, in contending for

the form, and the wild boar may be admitted to root up the vine, while the husbandmen are setting traps for the foxes.

Union is essential to the support of every cause, and to the strength of every society. Even "if Satan be divided against himself, his kingdom shall not stand." The enemies of religion, seem to have drawn this instruction, at least, from her pages, and to owe no small share of their strength and success, to the combination of effort and unity of object, which have distinguished their warfare against her. Would that her friends would take a lesson from their example! and unite their exertions to maintain that controversy which alone can render her effectually triumphant! One convert, gained to sincere faith, and practical holiness, would be a greater accession to her strength, than many, secured to a party or opinion. Nay, I might add, if it were not an unworthy motive, that the strength of every party, would be best increased by the individual virtue of its numbers; and the

best recommendation of a favourite system, would be an appeal to its beneficial effects.

And so, my friend, we are returned to the point from whence we set out, upon this voyage of enquiry, — the practical influence of religion, and the importance of this influence, to the success and authority of her institutions. I fear you will think I have made a very hasty and unsatisfactory progress ; but I shall be ready to retrace my way, and extend my observations, whenever you tell me that you are inclined to be my companion, and direct me to any point upon which you desire particularly to dwell.

Adieu.

LETTER XIV.

*HAS RELIGIOUS EDUCATION A TENDENCY TO EXCITE
PREJUDICE?*

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION CONSIDERED IN CONNECTION WITH THE SUBJECT OF THE FOREGOING LETTERS. — EDUCATION OF THE POOR — A MEASURE OF PRUDENCE — A DUTY. — AN IMPARTIAL EDUCATION UNATTAINABLE. — EDUCATION WITHOUT PRINCIPLE PERNICIOUS. — RELIGION THE ONLY BASIS OF SOUND PRINCIPLE. — LAWFULNESS AND PRUDENCE OF INCULCATING THE PRINCIPLES OF THE CHURCH. — ADVANTAGE OF THE NATIONAL SCHOOLS. — BEST MODE OF MAINTAINING AND IMPROVING THIS ADVANTAGE. — SUCH AN EDUCATION NOT LIKELY TO INCREASE THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS PREJUDICE. — NOT INCONSISTENT WITH LIBERALITY.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

I AM not surprised that you should perceive or apprehend some inconsistency with my general deprecation of prejudice, in the sentiments which I have often expressed on the subjects of education ; in which, as you observe, my great object seems to be, to establish a deep impression of religion, even before the mind is capable of comprehend-

ing its doctrines, or of appreciating its proofs; and to combine that impression, with a decided preference for the principles of the national church.

I might refer you to some of my earlier letters for the reasons upon which I ground my opinion of the necessity for this impression, *viz.* the inequality of the rational faculties, or at least of the opportunities for acquiring such information as is necessary to fix the judgment on the basis of strict conviction. To these, I might add another argument in favour of communicating early impressions of religion, in the coarse, but emphatical language, of one of our most pious prelates;—"If we do not educate our children, the devil will."

It has been, I know, a favourite position with some of our liberalists in education, that religion should be left as a subject for private judgment, or hereditary prejudice, and assigned a place altogether distinct from the general course of instruction;—that the principles of morality and honour,

should be inculcated, as conducive to man's happiness, and congenial to his dignity — (or, in other words, on the basis of interest and pride ;) — and that virtue should be exhibited as its own reward, in the respect and confidence which it inspires ; — while the dogmas of a particular creed (as the doctrines of religion are contemptuously called) are either openly set aside as the classifications of superstition, or waved, as questions merely speculative, and unconnected with the moral and practical influence of religion.

How far the moral dignity of man would secure his integrity, independently of religion, is a problem which has been repeatedly and impressively solved, in the history of the last thirty years. And indeed, the whole of our historical experience, sufficiently demonstrates the necessity of this principle, to the collective existence of man, in society, and to the support of all those moral and domestic relations, of which the aggregate of society, is formed.

(You must not, therefore, suspect me of deserting the opinion which I have always held and avowed,—that religion should not only be made the basis of education, but that it should be the leading and predominant object, to which every other pursuit is but instrumental and subordinate. Indeed, I can scarcely conceive that a teacher or parent who is deeply convinced of the realities of another world, can refrain from impressing this conviction, upon his pupils.

Yet I must agree with you, that, in adverting to the influence of prejudice, in the formation of religious parties, one of the first questions that occur, is, whether the extension of what is emphatically called religious education (I mean education in the principles of a particular church) has contributed to assuage, or to increase, it.

This, however, is a question which does not apply to the general duty of promoting religious education, but rather to the mode of conducting it; particularly, as it relates to the diffusion of instruction, through the

medium of certain authorised expositions of Scripture, which are designed to exhibit its doctrines, in a concise and connected system ; and to lead the youthful mind into those views of Divine truth, which the framers of such expositions, judged to be most scriptural.

I shall not here speak of religious education, generally, as that of the higher classes, cannot well be discussed upon any public principle, or made to bend to any general system. I shall therefore confine myself in these observations, to the education of the poor ; and enquire, upon what principles it may be conducted with the best prospect of advantage, and the least danger of exciting, or aggravating, religious prejudices and divisions.

Upon this subject, my dear friend, I would venture to lay down four positions :—first, that the religious education of the lower classes, is a measure of prudence and expediency ;—secondly, that it is a point of duty and obligation ;—thirdly, that an edu-

cation in strong and practical impressions of Christianity, is, by the Divine blessing, very generally possible ;—and, fourthly, that an education strictly scriptural and impartial, in points of speculative opinion, however desirable it may be, is hardly attainable in the present divided state of the Christian world.

That the religious education of the lower classes, is a measure of prudence and expediency, has been so awfully proved by the exhibitions we have witnessed, of the consequences resulting from the want of it, that we now find it urged, upon loyal and prudential grounds, even by those who are insensible to its spiritual advantages ; and who hold, that in higher stations, and different circumstances, morality might be secured upon other principles. The prejudice that revolted against the removal of that barrier which kept the poor in a state of hopeless inferiority, by perpetuating the poverty of their minds, has gradually given way to the conviction, that, as in a free and literary country, the buoyancy of a natural

ambition, will spontaneously burst this barrier, the necessary distinctions in society, must be guarded by some more effectual defence. It has been proved on the other hand, by sad experience, that knowledge without principle is an instrument of tremendous mischief; and that no principle but that of religious responsibility, is permanently and universally operative, in the stimulation of moral energy, and enforcement of moral restraint, which are the two great objects of education. Under this conviction, the friends of public morality and loyalty, have consistently withdrawn their countenance from those plans of general education, which, professing to leave the religious principle unbiassed, left it in reality, uncultivated, and have become as earnest advocates for the diffusion of religious knowledge, as those who urge it, upon higher principles.

The objection, that the general diffusion of education, would unfit the lower classes for their peculiar duties, and make them discontented with their place in society, has

been very fairly met by the reply, that necessity will secure their acquiescence in distinctions which no efforts of theirs can remove, and their diligence in labours which are requisite for their daily subsistence; — that the education of a whole class, would confer no invidious superiority on individuals; — but that, on the contrary, the ambition which a partial extension of education might excite, would here be corrected by the obvious impossibility of its gratification; and there would be no place left even for vanity, in an advantage equally participated by all.

It is indeed evident, that distinctions of rank and of property, must always exist in extensive societies, and that the lower offices must every where be filled by those whose necessities compel them to labour for the benefit or accommodation of others. Even if property were to change hands generally, in a state, it could only change the relative situation of individuals, and reduce to the necessity of labour, those who could no longer afford to purchase an exemption

from it. The scheme of a strict equality of conditions, is as chimerical, as it would be pernicious. The name and characters of the distinctions, may change, but their reality is inseparable from the very notion of property; and is, in some respects, advantageous, even in proportion to the inequality of its division, when personal liberty is secured, and the power of independent acquisition, is afforded to the efforts of industry and genius.

But though necessity might generally compel the lower classes to acquiesce in a depression which they could not remove, and to labour for a subsistence which they could not otherwise obtain, it must cease to operate as a restraining principle, when there appears any hope of successful resistance, or as a stimulant to farther industry, when the wants of nature are supplied. And in these cases, it is more than likely, that the restlessness of minds, awakened by partial cultivation, and unregulated by any principles of duty, will effervesce in turbulence and discontent, if it does not

operate more destructively, in licentiousness and rebellion.

Such, unhappily, has been the result within our own experience, of the advancement of popular education, when not founded upon the basis of religion ; and it is to be feared, that the observation of this result, has sometimes contributed to prejudice the cause of education, and to lead to an impression, that the ignorance of the lower classes, is the best security for their allegiance.

But a much better security will be found (may I not say that it has already been found?) in that high and principled loyalty which is the invariable result of a sound religious education ; of the communication of that knowledge,—which is calculated not only to enlighten the understanding, but to establish the principles, and regulate the conduct,—to excite the poor to rational hopes, and to animate them to persevering industry,—to raise them in their own estimation, by the conviction that they have a

place to occupy in society, and an appropriate duty to perform,—to hold out as the object of their reasonable ambition, the only equality that is not visionary, and to open to their view, the only dignity that is universally attainable.

That the system of religious education has not been uniformly successful, is sometimes made (inconsistently enough) an argument to disprove its general usefulness. In this argument, it appears to be quite forgotten, that universal success in education, is not to be attained in any class of society;—that with every advantage of rank and circumstance, the dulness or depravity of a scholar, will often counteract the labour of the most zealous teacher, and the vigilance of the most pious and anxious parent; and bring discredit upon the best instructions and institutions.

It is not, in fact, from some occasional failures, but from the numerous instances of success, that the merits of any general plan should be calculated; and in consider-

ing the influence of peculiar principles in education, a reference should be had to the peculiar cases in which they are to be applied. We are not here speaking of the abstract truth of religion, but of its prudential use, and its application to present interests only. Under this view, it may perhaps be possible, that a high scale of intellectual cultivation, and a favourable position in society, should produce apparently the same moral results, as a religious education. But these results will chiefly appear, in an abstinence from crimes to which there is no temptation, and an acquiescence in established orders, which personal interest alone, would suggest. In the case of the lower classes, however, the influence of these restraining principles, cannot be brought into operation. Their necessities leave them little time for intellectual improvement; and their interest in social institutions, from which they derive apparently so little advantage, is of too abstract and complicated a nature, to be easily manifested to their understandings. It may, moreover, be observed, that the

whole life of persons composing these classes, is commonly a scene of temptation ; and of temptation to those crimes especially, which infringe upon the rights of property, and the distinctions of society. They are surrounded with objects of allurements, upon which they have no claim, and in which they are seldom allowed a participation. They are unfurnished with resources for the innocent and useful employment of the mind ; and the intervals of their labour, are consequently wasted in sloth, or embittered by envy and despondence. They yield, indeed, a compulsory submission to laws which they dare not resist, but, like a bow forcibly bent, they are ready to start aside, at the first relaxation of the controlling power. Possessing little in this world, and hoping for nothing beyond it, such persons may perhaps be made loyal from fear, but they never will be loyal from principle ; nor can the attachment of a people to their rulers, be firmly established upon any other basis, than the sense of common responsibility to a common master.

But I will not trouble you farther with observations, of which experience has superseded the necessity ; and which, in fact, are applicable to those only, who speculate upon Christianity, as a system of expediency, abstractedly from a conviction of its truth as a Divine Revelation. Under this latter view, the question of religious education, becomes a question of conscience ; and the duty of communicating to the poor, the knowledge of the way of salvation, is not left to the decision of choice or of fancy. The Divine light which has been bestowed as a favour, is received as a sacred trust ; and the Christian feels his responsibility for its diffusion, in the example, as well as in the precept, of his Lord. He dares not consult with flesh and blood ; he dares not calculate upon motives merely temporal, the propriety of obedience to a positive command. He looks indeed, for every corroborative argument to impress and inculcate this duty upon others ; but he needs no more to determine his own practice, than his sense of the inestimable value of the blessing of

which he has been gratuitously made a partaker and a depositary.

With the spiritual objects of religious education conducted upon this principle of Christian duty, it is certainly lawful and reasonable to combine an attention to those prudential regulations, which appear best calculated to promote the attachment of the people, to the national religion and constitution. The scheme of a general Christian education, founded upon scriptural principles alone, and unbiassed by the views of any particular church or society, experience has proved to be impracticable. Even in the broad and simple plan of communicating instruction from the Bible exclusively, each sect has naturally, and perhaps insensibly, inculcated its own peculiar view of the Bible doctrines. This will be evident to any who peruse the correspondences occasionally published in the reports of the general societies ; and is, in fact, the unavoidable consequence of communicating any religious instruction whatever. The stream must take its tinc-

ture from the channel through which it passes. The questions of an intelligent child or pupil, will necessarily draw from his teacher, the illustration which he holds to be just ; and every new word to be explained, or new idea to be developed in the course of instruction, will furnish a ground for the establishment of a doctrine, the enforcement of a precept, or the infusion of a prejudice. It seems, therefore, chimerical to expect, that a general plan of Christian education, would form a community of general Christians, agreeing in the great and fundamental truths, and differing with charity, upon points less important. The more probable consequence of such a plan, would be the introduction of as many sects as there were schoolmasters ; and as the pupils became instructors in their turn, and engrafted their own excogitations on those of their predecessors, dissent would go on to extend itself *ad infinitum*. Such results did in fact begin to appear, from the general adoption of Lancaster's system ; and it is even reported to have led to the still worse effect,

of sometimes terminating dissent, in infidelity.

A prominent part of this generalizing plan, is the depreciation of creeds and catechisms, and authorised digests of religious doctrine, as human impositions, and encroachments upon Christian liberty. And so it must be acknowledged that they are, in any church which allows not the free examination of Scripture, or prescribes the reception of such formularies, as more than declarative and explanatory. But, under this restriction, it seems no more reasonable to object to the use of them, in religious education, than to refuse a child the assistance of a dictionary, when he is beginning to learn a new language. It detracts nothing from the excellence of the language, that the child does not understand it ; nor surely does it derogate from the perfection of the Christian system, that its leading truths should be classed and connected in a chain of concise propositions, forming an easy and impressive abridgement, for minds yet too weak for a general examination, and for

riper years, a summary of principles, which examination may indeed have established, but which a deficiency in the power of arrangement and expression, might leave in an indefinite or insulated form, not perhaps insufficient for personal direction or comfort, but incapable of precise transmission, and necessarily involving an obscurity or variation, in the expression of ideas, vaguely or variously received.

To pursue the analogy, may I not observe, that, in the introduction of oral or individual comment, which the generalizing system allows, and which indeed cannot be excluded from any system, that is not merely mechanical, we have a manifest and unavoidable infringement of the restriction so earnestly contended for; and that, consequently, the alternative, only, remains, whether to adopt in our schools of religious instruction, a variety of private and provincial glossaries, or to establish the academic and classical dictionaries of our pious and venerable reformers?

It is upon this opinion, that I ground my partiality for the system of the national schools, to which you object, as inconsistent with my general principles, and not free from a little of the prejudice and intolerance which I so much deprecate in other cases. I would not censure the activity of any class of Christians, or even of any conscientious individuals, in disseminating their religious opinions; and I most earnestly wish them success in the diffusion of that Scripture which is our common standard. But believing, as I do, that an education absolutely free from speculative prejudice, is unattainable, and that not even all the excellencies of the church, would secure her influence, against early impression, I cannot but think it incumbent upon her members, to support those schools in which her principles are inculcated, and to train the people to an habitual love for her venerable institutions. This duty might be urged, even if these institutions were not abstractedly preferable to others, farther than as they conduce to the support of civil order

and government ; but to those who believe and maintain their scriptural derivation and authority, it recommends itself upon the higher ground of religious obligation.

In adopting Dr. Bell's system of general education, which has all the advantages of Lancaster's without its defects, and combining it with a course of instruction in the principles of the church of England, the best possible expedient seems to have been devised, for at once securing the stability of the church, and improving the minds and morals of the rising generation ; and nothing remains but to execute the work, with an energy equal to the prudence which has been displayed in its conception.

It is not, however, by pecuniary sacrifices alone, that this great object can be accomplished. The establishments which have been so judiciously formed, and so liberally patronized, by the friends of the church, must be constantly and personally inspected ; the power, as well as the form, of godliness, must be sought, in the application

of religious instruction to the daily duties and occurrences of life ; and the distinguishing doctrines must be proved upon Scripture evidences and principles.

The execution of this part of the system, falls naturally and obviously, upon the educated members of the Establishment ; and much of its success, must depend upon their zeal. Indeed, if the children trained in the national schools, did not become better men and better Christians, as well as better churchmen, than those brought up in other institutions, this scheme for the defence of the Church, might become her destruction, by substituting the cold and speculative profession of orthodox opinions, and the spiritual self-deception which is its necessary consequence, for those deep impressions of piety, and strict principles of moral rectitude, which are the objects, and should be the results, of such an education.

I must here, however, notice one difficulty, both in a religious and a prudential view, connected not only with the national

system, but with all our improved plans of education for the poor ; and one which, I believe, has contributed to raise a prejudice against their farther instruction. I mean, the excitement of a certain vanity of scholarship, and ambition of literary distinction, which it is particularly important to repress in children educated for the humbler stations in society. This excitement is the almost unavoidable consequence of applying the principle of emulation (effectual as it is) as a stimulus to improvement ; and the passions so raised, are still farther encouraged by the publicity of the occasional examinations, and by the practice,— necessary, perhaps, to the popularity of such institutions,— of selecting the most forward and intelligent children, to satisfy the curiosity of casual visitors, and putting them through a part of the school-exercise, familiar to themselves, but new to their auditors. This practice, in the case of female children especially, (whose education, as connected with their subsequent influence in society, is of pre-eminent import-

ance,) seems calculated to awaken a spirit of exhibition, incompatible with the modesty and humility of character which prudence and religion would alike inculcate, and to foster those seeds of vanity, which are perhaps universally indigenous in the human mind, and to which the peculiar temptations of superior talents, attainments, or personal advantages, in human life, may give so large a growth, and so fatal a direction.

It is, I confess, delightful to witness the interesting exhibitions which occasionally take place at these seminaries, and difficult not to anticipate a plentiful harvest, from seed so carefully sown. But the observation will sometimes occur, that the frequency of these public exhibitions and examinations, may make the religious education of the poor, more *critical* than appears quite necessary or prudent; and the display of memory or acuteness, in the repetition of a narrative, or the elucidation of a doctrine, will afford less satisfaction to the reflecting observer,

than the blush that marks the application of Scripture to the heart, or the tear that indicates its effect upon the conscience.

Think not, my friend, that I would depreciate these excellent establishments, or insinuate that they are generally deficient in any advantages, that purity of principle, or perfection of regulation, can give. I would only observe, that, from their constitution, it is impossible to give them their full religious effect, without the aid of individual zeal and piety. Their great extent, (which in large towns is unavoidable,) as well as the strictness of their mechanism, must generally preclude any characteristic application of instruction, by the regular masters ; and the plan, of executing much of the work, by employing the elder children as teachers, though valuable, as well from its economical advantages, as from its effect in developing the faculties of the children, must necessarily limit the instruction of the junior classes, to the letter, or prescribed expositions, of Scripture ; more calculated, from the manner in which they

must be taught, to exercise the memory, than to inform the judgment, and precluding that personal and appropriate application, to which the vigilant and affectionate instructor alone, is adequate, and without which, all religious instruction is vain. The foundation must indeed be laid, (and it is admirably laid in these institutions,) by storing the memory of the child, with Scripture facts, and rightly directing his view of Scripture doctrines. But to improve these facts to his own instruction, and to apply these doctrines to his own consolation, he must be taught by a different process. And here it is, my friend, I conceive, that the exertions of the pious and well educated members of the church, are eminently useful, and indeed indispensably necessary. In such exertions, added to the system of parochial catechizing, now so happily resumed in many places, and, it is to be hoped, so generally and rapidly extending, a foundation of sound and rational and scriptural principle would be laid in the minds of the rising generation; and, furnished with rules for their conduct, and

reasons for their faith, they would be attached to their national church, from judgment and conviction, as well as from habit, and guarded (under the Divine protection) alike against the allurements of temptation, and the delusions of sophistry.

Nor does it appear to me, that such an education would be likely to increase the influence of religious prejudice. If a strict impartiality and abstraction of sentiment, be, as I have supposed, impossible, and if the most general plan of instruction be unavoidably, though insensibly, diffusive of the peculiar opinions of its conductors, there seems no security, that a degree of prejudice shall not in every instance be excited; and the question only remains, whether, in various independent establishments, differing among themselves in minor particulars, and agreeing only in their jealousy of one, there may not be really much of the spirit of division and hostility, though the prominent prejudice in which they agree, may assuage or suspend their prejudices against each other.

In fact, liberality is no more a necessary attendant upon dissent, or variation, in religion, than upon conformity to a particular standard ; though it is, for obvious reasons, a subject of more frequent discussion and profession, with those who differ from the national church. It will really exist in either association, only in proportion to the degree of Christian spirit and feeling, that is infused by Divine grace, and improved by a close and personal application of the Divine precepts.

The comparative degrees of prejudice, which may result from the national, sectarian, or more general, plans of education, must depend, I think, upon the temper with which they are respectively carried on. In the two former, it is evident, that a spirit of religious association will be generated, and a bias will be impressed in favour of the opinions of a particular society or class. In the latter, there is indeed the appearance of impartiality, but there cannot (and we may say it without any disparagement of their sincerity and

piety) be more of the reality, than exists in the minds of its conductors. Whatever views of Scripture doctrine, they may have derived from education, from conviction, or even from prejudice, will be insensibly transfused into their teaching; and if the pupil be professedly left to chuse a church for himself, under the notion of exercising his Christian liberty, is it not also to be feared, that a pride of independence, and a certain latitudinarian prejudice, may lead him to despise the duties of Christian subordination and communion, and to strike out some new and eccentric path in religion?

Under any of these views, a question may arise, as to what modification of prejudice is preferable? and the answer may at last depend upon the prejudices of the enquirer. It does not, however, follow from hence, that it is a question of mere caprice or opinion. As connected with the vital and fundamental truths of religion, it is a question of conscience; as associated with our civil obligations and interests, it is a question of

duty and of prudence ; and as it rests upon the evidence of fact and experience, it is a question capable of a satisfactory, or at least of a probable, solution.

The above observations, of course, apply to the conduct of education, as a national concern. The right of Dissenters from the Established Church, to educate their poor in their own principles, if they chuse to undertake the expense, or the propriety of more general establishments for the reception of those whom the prejudices of their parents or their country, may exclude from the National Schools, no liberal and reflecting Protestant will dispute ; nor will the conscientious Churchman refuse to contribute his aid to institutions of either description. An education in the vital principles of Christianity, will be, in all cases, his primary object ; and if he cannot communicate these principles, exactly in the association he prefers, he will communicate them in any association that can ensure their willing and effectual reception.

I fear you will not be satisfied with all these cold calculations, and express your reproof for not having endeavoured more strongly to enforce a duty, of which we both so deeply feel the importance. But you must recollect, that, in entering upon the subject, I expressly assumed the duty, and proposed to limit my enquiry, to the most prudent and effectual mode of discharging it. In fact, all that I could say upon the general question, has been much better said by others, and a repetition of religious arguments, would have but little weight, except with those who already acknowledge it as a religious obligation, and to whom they are, consequently, unnecessary.

Adieu.

LETTER XV.

THE BIBLE SOCIETY.

OF THE BIBLE SOCIETY AS CONNECTED WITH THE GENERAL SUBJECT. — CIRCULATION OF THE BIBLE, A PROTESTANT PRINCIPLE; AND THE DISTINCTION OF ALL THE PROTESTANT CHURCHES. — SOME OBJECTIONS NOTICED. — PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE OF THE REFORMERS, WITH RESPECT TO THE CIRCULATION OF THE BIBLE. — SUBSEQUENT ABUSES, AN OCCASION OF PREJUDICE. — DECLINE OF RELIGION UNDER CHARLES II. — REVIVAL UNDER WILLIAM AND MARY. — RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATIONS CONNECTED WITH THE CHURCH. — JEALOUSY ENTERTAINED OF THESE ASSOCIATIONS. — ORIGIN OF THE SOCIETIES FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE, AND FOR THE PROPAGATION OF THE GOSPEL. — SIMILARITY OF THE HISTORY OF THESE INSTITUTIONS WITH THAT OF THE BIBLE SOCIETY. — DISTINCTIONS, AND THEIR CAUSES. — THE OPEN PRINCIPLE OF THE BIBLE SOCIETY, A RECOMMENDATION TO THE FIRST EMINENT CHURCHMEN WHO JOINED IT.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

You are right in your conjecture, that I should include the Bible Society in the number of controverted subjects, and of those especially on which jealousy has arisen, chiefly through mutual prejudice and

misapprehension ; and notwithstanding the many favourable hints which you have discovered in the course of my past letters, you expect, from my orthodox prejudices, as you call them, a participation of this jealousy. Though I will not say that you are mistaken in this expectation, till I shall have enabled you to judge for yourself, I may honestly say that I have endeavoured to hold the balance fairly ; and that, in debating the question for my own satisfaction, I have tried to give every argument that I had heard on either side, its due weight and proportion.

I believe I shall best communicate to your mind, the final impression which has been made upon my own, if I play the advocate, and the opponent, by turns ; and give you, alternately, objection, and defence, as they appear to my apprehension.

It has been often, and very justly, remarked by the friends of this Society, that if any one unacquainted with the history of our present controversies, were asked, what

question, of all others, was least likely to awaken the prejudices, or divide the opinions, of the Christian world, he would probably answer,—the duty of circulating the Bible, and of propagating the Christian faith. He would say, here is a point on which there can be no difference of sentiment ;—here is a ground on which all may meet, who acknowledge the supreme authority of the Bible, however they may differ in the explanation of its contents. Here is an enterprise, in which all may join who love the Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity, however various may be their forms of worship, their modes of discipline, and (we may add, unless they fear the test of a comparison with the Bible, which no Christian church will refuse to acknowledge as a standard,) even their schemes of doctrine.

In the only church which has professedly closed the Scriptures against general examination, the exclusion was tacit and gradual ; the result of darkening ignorance and barbarism in the world, consequent upon the subversion of the Roman empire,

and of the encroaching ambition of the church, a body composed of fallible men, subject to the influence of those corrupting causes which the Divine Wisdom has made the instruments of man's moral probation.

After the revival of letters, and the resuscitation of Scripture from the oblivion in which it had slept for centuries, had rendered it impossible to conceal it altogether, from the inquisitive or the pious, the first objection to its general circulation, seems to have been made, not so much upon the ground of its injurious influence on what was called the orthodox faith, as of its insufficiency to establish that faith, in the full and systematic form which had been gradually impressed upon it, by various concurring causes ; while the true reason, was, probably, its hostility to that scheme of ecclesiastical discipline, which was rather calculated to gratify the ambition of one class of men, by the exaltation of the spiritual authority, and to quiet the consciences or the fears of another by the offer of an easy commutation for purity and holiness of life, than to promote the salvation of either.

That "Holy Scripture doth not contain all things necessary to salvation" was the boldest assertion which this church ventured to make, till the blaze of scriptural knowledge which the Reformation poured upon the world, showed that the traditions which were received as illustrations, were, in reality, abuses, of religion ; that the true objection to the free circulation of Scripture was not its defectiveness, but its express contrariety to a system professedly founded upon it ; and the apprehension that a privilege of comparing the then state of the church, with a standard not only infallible but unalterable, would inevitably lead to the disavowal of any human authority in points of religious belief, which was not manifestly in accordance with that standard.

In the reception of the Scriptures, into general and familiar use, by all the Protestant churches, and a translation of them into all the languages of Europe, an effectual security was provided against any adulteration which they might suffer from private prejudice or misapprehension ; and a facility of

comparing the several translations, and each respectively with the sacred books in their original languages, afforded at once a pledge of the general fidelity of the interpreters, and a defence against wilful or deceptive misinterpretation.

It does not diminish the value of this privilege of examination, to the Christian world, that it was only within the reach of learned and studious persons. In the varieties of rank and occupation, which the necessities of life introduce into society, even if men could be supposed generally qualified, time would not be found for the universal exercise of this privilege; and it is surely an inestimable advantage, that, in all these different nations and languages, there is some authenticated standard of the sacred text, varying only in unavoidable and idiomatic distinctions; not only submitting to, but soliciting a comparison with, the original record, and guarded from corruption, by the jealousy, if not always by the integrity, of those who differ from each other, in its interpretation. The unlettered

Christian may safely acquiesce in the fidelity of a version which has been tried in the furnace of controversy ; and though he acknowledges that he sees but through a glass, darkly, and thankfully receives any information which may confirm his confidence, and establish his principles, for his present satisfaction, he may trust for all knowledge necessary to his salvation, to that illuminating spirit which is promised to all who seek it, through the appointed means of obedience, study, and prayer.

That human ignorance and corruption will sometimes pervert the meaning of Scripture, and wrest it (as we know from Scripture itself) to the most destructive consequences, was not considered by the reformers, as an argument against the study of the Bible, but rather against the assumption, by a particular church, of an exclusive privilege of exposition. If some of these venerable men appear to have acted upon this very assumption, and to have sometimes dogmatized in the spirit of the church which they had quitted, the fault was in

their times, and in their education. Their perpetual appeal to the law and to the testimony established indefeasibly, the sufficiency of Holy Scripture in matters pertaining to salvation, and the right of private judgment, in the examination of any human comment ; though their anxiety to impress what they conceived to be the true interpretation of Scripture may have led them occasionally into the practice (unavoidable, perhaps, where there is much ardour and energy of character, and likely to obtain particularly, in times of controversy,) of urging their own views of Scripture doctrine, without liberty of choice or modification.

The doctrinal differences which have separated the Protestant communities from each other, and the zeal with which each of these communities has defended its own peculiar scheme, have been adduced by the advocates of the Romish church, as arguments against the Reformation, and proofs of the insufficiency of Scripture, as a rule and standard of faith ; while the unity of

opinion, supposed to be necessary in the Catholic church, and asserted to exist in the church of Rome alone, has been pleaded in support of the universality of her claims, and in proof of the alleged infallibility of her decisions. This unity, however, it is acknowledged, exists rather in profession, than in principle. It is maintained by the strong hand of ecclesiastical authority, and admitted, sometimes indeed from conscience, but often from fear, policy, or indifference. The parties in this church are as various in their sentiments, though apparently united under a common head, and bound together by a common discipline, as those who have separated from her communion ; and the faith of the great body of her members, even as drawn from their own authorised formularies, and the expositions of their most approved divines, does not appear to be so consistent and unvarying, as might be expected from the supposed infallibility of their standard.

In truth, my friend, it appears, that till faith shall be lost in sight, there can be no

such thing as a strict uniformity of opinion ; and it seems of the very nature of religious faith, that the subjects upon which it is required, should admit some exercise of the judgment, and leave room for the free-assent of the will. This is expressly provided for by our blessed Lord himself, in appealing to his miracles, as evidence of his divine mission ; and it is also acknowledged by the apostles, in asserting the authority of the Jewish Scriptures, and referring to the examination of them, for proof of the Christian dispensation.

The distinct provinces of faith and reason, in religious enquiries, will not be likely to embarrass him who has once fixed in his mind, the conviction, that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God ;” and that “it is profitable,” not only “for doctrine,” but “for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” His reason will then find abundant exercise, in regulating his opinions and practice, by this standard, and his faith will receive ample confirmation, in the growing influence of its doctrines, upon his

character, and the daily increasing value of its promises, to his heart. He will feel that the genuineness of the divine record, is the only privileged subject of enquiry ; and, conscious of his incapacity to comprehend those sublime mysteries of his religion which have been probably revealed but in part, for the trial of his humility and his faith, he will receive them in their scriptural simplicity of enunciation ; though he will not be insensible of the value of some short and precise definitions, to fix these great truths in his mind, and to establish a sort of criterion of unity in principle with his fellow Christians.

But, indeed, in whatever varieties of exposition, the zeal of reform, or the licence of innovation, may have indulged, the establishment of Scripture as the supreme and authoritative standard of faith, has introduced the true principle of Christian unity—the infallibility of the divine word, and the universal fallibility of man. It does not follow, that, from the latter principle, every man should stand alone, in his reli-

gion; nor will he who honestly studies his Bible, question the lawfulness of adhering to his church, while he finds the duty of social worship expressly enjoined, and the Christian church divided into societies, and subjected to a regular form of government, even from its very first establishment. Those who think deeply, will perceive the analogy of their temporal and spiritual necessities, and their need of association in the one, as in the other. Those who do not think, will feel the advantage of example and of habit, and the value of a system which condenses for their use, the wide scheme of Scripture truth, and which urges no claim of authority over their consciences, that has not the testimony of Scripture, for its basis. Safe in their privilege of continual reference to this infallible test, they will follow their brethren to the house of prayer; and, in reading and hearing the divine word, which forms a specific part of every Protestant ritual, (and is most largely provided for by the Church of England,) they will find their attention, perpetually, and, as it were, involuntarily, drawn to the

contemplation of the agreement of their faith, with this its immutable foundation. They will also find, unless in some unfortunate instances of depravity of character, or aberration of mind, the indissoluble connection of faith and morality ; and instead of shrinking from the use of this term, as expressive of pagan, or of natural virtue, they will learn to use it, in its higher and nobler application to moral practice upon Christian principles, and to admit no definition of virtue, that has not the love of God, for its basis, and the revealed will of God, for its rule.

As the fundamental principle of the reformation, was the sufficiency of Scripture, as a rule of faith, the diligent study of it, was early enjoined in England, and even provided for by public authority, so far as the conflicting interests and prejudices of those distracted times, would permit ; and any limitations with which the privilege was guarded, applied, not to the right of enquiry in individuals, but to the liberty of exercising, without commission or autho-

rity, the office of exposition, in the Church, or entering into captious disputation upon Scripture, instead of applying it to personal and practical instruction.

After the surreptitious introduction* of Tindal's translation in 1526, and the subsequent prohibition of it, by the bishops, (who were all, at that period, adherents of the church of Rome,) a struggle was maintained for some years, by the Reformers, and the ground gained, as it were, inch by inch, till the introduction of the English Bible, — first into the churches, and then into familiar and domestic use, — was accomplished, chiefly by the exertions of Cranmer.

I know that it has been said by some who apprehend eventual injury to the Church, from the unlimited circulation of the Bible, that such was not the principle nor the object of the English reformers. And of Cranmer, in particular, it has been asserted, that "his first great object, was to provide a sufficient supply of able ministers; and that it was *only when frustrated in this,*

that he *tried the expedient* of reading the Bible. Nor even then, did he commit it to the people, without note or comment."

This does not, however, appear to be quite a fair representation of the archbishop's proceeding. He does not seem to have resorted to the reading of the Bible, as a *last expedient on the failure of every other*, but to have *begun* with it, as the *basis* of all reformation, and to have earnestly and unceasingly contended for the privilege, till he established it, in the face of all the bigotry of his brethren, and all the caprice of his sovereign. The use of comment and exposition, (not, at that time, intended as an illustration of Scripture, but as a substitute for it,) was proposed, not by Cranmer, but by the bishops on the other side; and though the reformers readily assented to the use of such comment, as a "necessary help," yet, (says Burnet,) "they by no means thought that sufficient; but said, *the people must be allowed to search the Scripture*, by which they might be convinced that such treatises were according to it,"

Cranmer's introduction of Erasmus's Paraphrase, which has, I think, been cited as a proof that he deemed exposition of the Scriptures, indispensable, was many years subsequent to this period: and it is remarkable, that instead of providing it as *preparatory* to the study of the Bible, he enjoins the reception of the *latter*, within *three* months, and allows *twelve*, for the *former*. Of the Homilies, (to which an appeal has also been made, in proof of the judgment of the Reformers on this subject,) it was expressly directed, that they should be read in the churches, when there was not a sermon; and their professed object was to supply the deficiency of "the gift of preaching" in the clergy of that day,—but not, (so far as it appears,) to be placed in the hands of individuals, as authoritative comments upon Scripture, or indispensable helps towards the attainment of divine knowledge.

Cranmer then, who may justly be called the Father of the English Reformation, and to whom (under Providence) we owe the legal establishment of our pure and scrip-

tural Faith, seems to have held this free use and possession of the Bible, to be the privilege and birth-right of every Christian ; and to have proceeded upon this principle, from the commencement of his great work, under Henry the Eighth, to its consummation, under his successor. When Grafton's Bible was published in 1538, and permission granted by Henry, that it might be used by all indifferently, Cranmer is said to have been " full of gladness and gratitude ;" and to have " written to the king, two letters, one after another, assuring him, that for his part, it was such a content to his mind, that he could not have done him a greater pleasure, if he had given him a thousand pounds."

The perpetual references to Scripture, in the sermons of the Reformers, and the appeals to the people, as capable, from an acquaintance with Scripture, of understanding and appreciating their doctrine, and still more, their habit of contrasting their own practice in this respect, with that of the church of Rome, seem to prove, that the

privilege of studying the Scriptures, was freely allowed, however imperfectly it might at times, have been exercised, or however injuriously, abused. Some abuse, indeed, was naturally to be expected, in minds so recently opened to the truth, and so little prepared for its reception. This, however, as I have already remarked, appears to have been no more considered by the Reformers, as an argument against the circulation and study of Scripture, than a similar objection was, by the early Christians, or by the Apostles themselves. Even Queen Elizabeth, who was sufficiently arbitrary in the exercise of her ecclesiastical supremacy, does not seem to have interdicted, or in any degree restrained, the reading of the Bible; though she thought it necessary to direct and define the course of public interpretation. It may also be observed, that the National Worship, reformed under Edward, and rejected by Mary, was at that time in its progress towards a legal re-establishment; and that these precautions appear to have been adopted for its more efficient illustration and defence, and for the purpose of

arming the people against the sophistry of the church of Rome.

The melancholy abuse and perversion of Scripture, in the succeeding reigns ; the protracted and angry controversy upon questions which seemed to be wrapped in a mystery impenetrable by the human understanding ; the pertinacious adherence to unimportant forms, or the morose and undistinguishing rejection of all those venerable forms which the wisdom and piety of the church had retained ; the consequent excitement of prejudice and fanaticism, and the growing extension and irritation of both, till all vital piety was discredited on the one hand, and loyalty was at last, discarded on the other ; the blasphemous assertion of the divine warrant and example, for the commission of the most flagrant crimes, and the application of special cases in Scripture, to the subversion of all the principles of civil and religious subordination ; — instead of awakening men to a sense of the inherent corruption, which could thus pervert the best gift of God, and the acknowledgment

of which, formed a prominent article of their Faith, terminated, unhappily, in throwing a certain degree of obloquy upon this precious gift itself, and associating its sublime doctrines, and even its venerable phraseology, with the imputations of republican pride, and pharisaical formality. Even the many bright examples of the union of loyalty and holiness, of eminent patriotism and ardent piety, failed to destroy this capricious association. The evils which had resulted from the perversion, were identified with the sacred principle itself, and these instances were regarded only as exceptions to its general influence, resulting, perhaps, from some favourable circumstances of temper or education.

The utter absence of all religious principle, in Charles the Second, and the torrent of infidelity and licentiousness, which deluged the country under his authority and example, associated, as they were, with so much that was attractive, in the manners of the sovereign, and so much that was honourable and interesting, in the loyalty of his

faithful adherents, strengthened these unfortunate and erroneous impressions; and they were still farther confirmed by the insincerity, or instability, of some, who changed their manners, or their principles, with the times; “and thought,” as Burnet says, “that they could not otherwise redeem themselves from the censures and jealousies which the former transactions had brought upon them, than by going into the stream, and laughing at all religion.”

It is unnecessary, and would be foreign to our present object, to enlarge upon the difference of parties in the church, or upon the interest which either might have had, in marking the line of separation that distinguished it from the other. It is, however, obvious, that a broad line of external distinction existed between these parties, which, to the eye of prejudice, might have rendered religion repulsive, if not questionable. The perversions of Scripture, which had been pleaded as an apology for the past excesses, had brought all familiar use and citation of Scripture, into a temporary dis-

repute, even with many who did not disown its authority ; and most of those who had strength and piety to resist this change of fashion, were unhappily exposed, by their opposition to the court, and their scruple of conforming to some parts of the discipline re-established in the Church, to the imputations of disloyalty and puritanism ; terms which were indeed considered as synonymous. Yet it is but justice to remark, that no characters could have been more distinct, than the high Puritan of the Commonwealth, and many of the Non-conformists of the Restoration. And though we may be allowed to lament, that a too precise or uncomplying spirit should have separated such men from the religious establishment of their country, we cannot refuse to acknowledge their loyalty, to admire their integrity, and to honour their unquestionable piety and zeal.

Charles, like Julian, injured religion, chiefly by ridicule and contempt ; though, less consistent than the Roman apostate, he continued to insult it, by the participation

of its rites. "He seemed," says Burnet, "to have no sense of religion. Both at prayers and sacrament, he, as it were, took care to satisfy the people, that he was in no sort concerned in that about which he was employed." He engaged the vanity of his courtiers, to condemn that which their monarch so openly despised; and so general was the fashion of infidelity, that the defence of the Church, seems to have become (with very few exceptions) rather a question of policy, than of conscience. The civil rights of the community, were entwined with the ecclesiastical establishment; and though literary presumption had exonerated itself from the restraints, and even from the decencies of religion, the notable discovery had not yet been made, that such restraints are unnecessary for the people.

One beneficial consequence, however, resulted from this capricious league of infidelity, with wit and learning. It became important to show that they had no natural connection; and the triumphant display of both these advantages, in the defence of our

holy faith, and the enforcement of that practical morality which is its necessary fruit, proved the truth of this position beyond all question ; and has obtained for the reign of Charles the Second (from one who was well qualified to judge) the remarkable encomium, that it is likely ever to be esteemed the golden age of theological literature.

During the whole of this period, we find the supreme authority of the Holy Scriptures, and their sufficiency as a rule of faith, most strenuously asserted ; and the renewed competition with Popery in the following reign, seems to have awakened a general and practical sense of the value of such a standard.

When the prudence and the piety of William, had restored decency to the court, and the example of his excellent consort, had shown the compatibility of strict Christian principle, with high rank and eminent accomplishments, “ a spirit of zeal and devotion, and of public charities, sprung up,

beyond what was known in former times ;” and a magnificent superstructure appears to have been raised upon the foundation, laid in the preceding reign, by a few pious individuals. The process of this great work, effected at different times, and by various instruments, will be best described in the words of the venerable historian.

“ In king James’s reign,” (says Bishop Burnet,) “ the fear of Popery was so strong, as well as just, that many, in and about London, began to meet often together, both for devotion, and for their farther instruction. Things of that kind, had been formerly practised only among the Puritans and Dissenters ; but these were of the Church ; and came to their ministers, to be assisted with forms of prayer and other directions. They were chiefly conducted by Doctor Burridge and Doctor Horneck. Some disliked this, and were afraid it might prove the original of new factions and parties ; but wiser men and better, thought that it was not fit nor decent, to check a spirit of devotion, at such a time. It might have

given scandal, and it seemed a discouraging of piety, and might be a mean to drive evil-meaning persons over to the Dissenters. After the Revolution, these societies grew more numerous; and for a greater encouragement to devotion, they got such collections to be made, as maintained many clergymen to read prayers in so many places, and at so many different houses, that devout persons might have that comfort at every hour of the day. There were constant sacraments every Lord's day in many churches: there were both greater numbers, and greater appearances of devotion, at prayers and sacraments, than had been observed in the memory of man. These societies resolved to inform the magistrates, of swearers, drunkards, profaners of the Lord's day, &c. &c.; and they threw in the part of the fine given by law to informers, into a stock of charity. From this, they were called Societies of Reformation. Some good magistrates encouraged them, but others treated them roughly. As soon as the late queen (Mary) heard of this, she did, by her letters and proclamations, en-

courage these good designs, which were afterwards prosecuted by the late king. Other societies set themselves to raise charity-schools, for teaching poor children, for clothing them, and binding them out to trades. Many books were printed, and sent over the nation by them, to be freely distributed. These were called societies for propagating Christian knowledge. In many places of the nation, the clergy met often together, to confer about matters of religion and learning; and they got libraries to be raised for their common use. At last, a corporation was created by the late king (William), for the purpose of propagating the Gospel among infidels; for settling schools in our plantations; for furnishing the clergy sent thither; and for sending missionaries among such of our plantations as were not able to provide pastors for themselves. It was a glorious conclusion of a reign that had begun with preserving our religion,—thus to create a corporation for propagating it to the remotest parts of the earth, and among infidels. There were very liberal subscriptions made to it, by

many of the bishops and clergy, who set about it with great care and zeal. Upon queen Anne's accession to the crown, they had all possible assurances of her favour and protection, of which, upon every application, they received very eminent marks."

With what sentiments the writer of this passage, would view the contentions to which similar exertions in the present day, have given rise, it is hardly necessary to enquire. One observation, however, may be drawn from his statement, viz. that the zeal of reformation will, in every age, excite the hostility of the supine or the prejudiced; and the example of obstacles surmounted, and prejudices removed, by persevering benevolence and piety, may encourage the hopes, and stimulate the energies, of those who have to struggle with the like obstructions.

Assuming the compatibility of the free circulation of the Scriptures, with the interests of the established Church (which indeed it would appear that no reflecting

Churchman could deny, unless upon the ground of some alloy associated with the mode, or the channels, of circulation), the question only remains, as to the prudence of urging that alloy, as a counterpoise to the advantages ; and suffering the apprehension of a possible consequence which the vigilance and energy of the Church may prevent, to deter her from the discharge of a positive duty.

If the venerable societies mentioned in the preceding extract, were exclusively Church institutions (a circumstance which is perhaps justly pleaded in proof of their title to the preferable support of the Church), it may be observed, that the general state of religion, at that time, did not seem to create the same necessity for the coalition of all parties, in its defence ; and that the recency of religious faction, identified as it was with political discontent, and the still imperfect apprehension of the true principles and practice of toleration, appears to have rendered such a coalition impossible. Besides, the popular controversy of that

day (so far at least as the *home* operations of these societies were concerned), turned rather upon the different modes and forms of religion, than upon the Christian or Anti-Christian principle. The question of doctrine, then seemed to be, between the Church of Rome on the one side, and the Bible and the Church of England on the other; the question of morals, between the superstitious and supererogatory works and observances of Popery, and the holy, and humble, and self-renouncing obedience of the Gospel. Infidelity was yet confined to the closet of the sceptic, or circulated in vehicles not inviting or accessible to every taste and capacity. Its baleful influence had not yet pervaded the great body of the people; nor had the history of any other country, exhibited the tremendous spectacle, of a whole nation unanimously renouncing their allegiance to their God and Saviour, and establishing atheism, as their creed, and force, as their standard of morality, — subverting all ancient institutions, as the result of ignorance, and all prescriptive governments, as the offspring of usurp-

ation,— rejecting all controul of conscience, in moral, or political, or social, or even domestic, relations,— and labouring with diabolical activity, to render the still peaceable and pious inhabitants of other countries, as wretched and as miserable as themselves.

Such a spectacle has been reserved for these latter days; and it has opened to us, a volume of instruction, corroborative of all the early lessons of religion. It has taught us most impressively, the truth of our Saviour's declaration, that "Man doth not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." It has shown us, that the possession of every natural advantage, of every literary accomplishment, of all that the fulness of the earth can supply, or the art and ingenuity of man can improve to his delight and accommodation, afford no security for national prosperity or individual happiness, without the salutary restraint of the only principle that can effectually controul man's natural selfishness, and correct the depravity of a heart "deceitful above all things, and

desperately wicked." It has taught us, that the dignity of human nature is a chimera ; and that moral science has no true standard but revelation. It has shown us, that however the baleful character of infidelity may be softened or neutralized in particular instances, by the counteracting influence of Christian laws and institutions, or by the decencies even of an externally Christian intercourse, its invariable result, when free from these restraints, is the disruption of every tie that holds communities together, and the substitution of one pervading principle of dark and malignant rivalry, for all that is holy, and honourable, and endearing, in human society.

The controversy thus affecting the very existence of religion,* it was natural that

* A passage in the prospectus published by the Bible Society, in 1804, refers expressly to these circumstances, as the principal ground of its establishment.

" The reasons which call for such an institution, chiefly refer to the prevalence of ignorance, superstition, and idolatry, over so large a portion of the world ; to the limited nature of the respectable societies now

minor differences should be forgotten, and that Christians of every class and denomination, should unite in defence of their faith; which, under whatever form received, they professed to draw from the same source, and to regulate by the same standard. And it was by unfurling this sacred standard to the world, and sending their heralds of mercy, to bear it to the farthest ends of the earth, that the projectors of this noble institution, arrested the progress of infidelity and anarchy, revived the charities and the decencies of life, diffused the spirit of peace, in the midst of a protracted warfare, and established a new bond of brotherhood between the nations.

No exclusive or local institution could have accomplished, or attempted all this; and it appears a signal circumstance in the

“ in existence, and their acknowledged insufficiency to
“ supply the demand for Bibles, in the United Kingdom
“ and foreign countries; and to the recent attempts which
“ have been made on the part of infidelity, to discredit the
“ evidence, vilify the character, and destroy the influence,
“ of Christianity.”

Providence which has directed this great work, that, without original plan or premeditation, the Bible Society has been constituted of such elements, as could alone have fitted it for the achievement of these objects, in its foreign relations.* If the ap-

* It is observable, that while the necessity of the co-operation of all classes of Christians, in such a work, was acknowledged by our most distinguished churchmen, the fundamental rule, that the Scriptures shall be circulated without note or comment, which has been latterly urged as an objection to the society, was the *express ground* on which they consented to support it. In proof of this I may cite the following passage from the Life of Bishop Porteus; and many other parallel testimonies might be produced.

“ It was laid down as a primary and fundamental rule, from which there was in no instance, to be the slightest deviation, that the sole and exclusive object of the society, should be the circulation of the Scriptures, and the *Scriptures only, without note or comment.* ”

“ A limitation so absolute and unequivocal, removed from the Bishop’s mind all doubt and hesitation. He saw instantly, that a *design* of such magnitude, which aimed at nothing less than the dispersion of the Bible, over every accessible part of the world, could be accomplished only by the association of men of all religious persuasions. He looked forward to great results from such a combination of effort. He entertained the hope that it might operate as a bond of

parently fortuitous and trifling events which occasion important revolutions, and the manifest inadequacy of such causes, to the production of consequences so disproportionate, have been adduced as proofs of the divine government of the world, how much more striking is their evidence, when the object of the dispensation is exclusively moral and spiritual ; and when the extent is magnificent beyond all former example !

Attempts have been made, to trace to moral, or to natural causes, the unprecedented success of this great association ; and undoubtedly many such causes have assisted and accelerated its progress. But the obvious insufficiency of the original means and instruments, for the accomplishment of such an object ; the uniform issue

“ union between contending parties ; and that by bringing them together, on one point of vast moment, about which *there could hardly be a difference of opinion*, it might gradually allay that bitterness of dispute, and put an end to those unhappy divisions, which had so long tarnished the credit of the Christian world.” *Hodgson's Life of Bishop Porteus.*

of every unfavourable prospect, in some new and unexpected advantage; the stone thus cut out of the mountain without hands, so rapidly filling the earth; all these can hardly be contemplated, without impressing upon every pious mind the conviction, that "this is the finger of God."

That a large alloy of evil will infuse itself into every work in which human instruments are employed, and that some of this alloy is occasionally to be found in the conduct of the Bible Society (or, rather, of some of its individual members), is no more an argument against the principle of associating for the more effectual circulation of Scripture, than were the errors of the early heretics, against the general preaching of the Gospel. The objections, however, which have been made upon this ground to the Bible Society, are chiefly confined to its domestic operations; and it is important to make this distinction, as it leads to another, which may perhaps account for the jealousy excited by these operations,

and the comparative approbation and unanimity which have attended its foreign exertions.

Wherever this institution has laboured to establish auxiliary societies on the continent of Europe (except in Roman Catholic countries), its first object has been to place these societies under the protection of their respective governments, and to ally them, if possible, with their national churches. In this endeavour, they have been generally successful; and the public patronage of the prince and of the clergy, has not only promoted the circulation of Scripture, by means of these societies, but has also secured a strict adherence on their part, to the principle of non-interference with local religious distinctions; while these governments, maintaining an ecclesiastical authority less modified by principles of general liberty, than that which exists in our own country, possess, and scruple not to exercise, the power of restraining the licence of interpretation, and requiring, at least, a

general and external conformity in religion.

In this way, the ground of public jealousy is removed, which must naturally accompany such an institution at home ; — existing, as it does, in the midst of conflicting sects, — composed of elements apparently so discordant, — independent of the controul of ecclesiastical authority, — and destitute of that public and legal support, which an exclusive alliance with the established Church, would supply.

Whether this jealousy, natural as it is, be a sufficient ground of objection on the part of the Church, is another question ; but that it is the real ground of objection, is evident. It is not, that any consistent Churchman fears a comparison of his faith, with the Scripture, but that he fears that proneness to perversion, by which, disaffected and intemperate zealots may wrest the Scripture to their own destruction. It is not, that he objects to the reading of the Bible, or questions the duty of promoting its universal circulation, but

that he doubts whether this channel of distribution is most consistent with the discipline of his own Church, and most conducive to her interests; and whether the work may not be done as effectually, and more safely, by a society differently constituted.

But while this scruple, and this alone, has separated from the Bible Society, many conscientious ministers and members of the establishment, who are as anxious for the diffusion of the Bible, as the most active and zealous of its agents, it is to be lamented, that other arguments have been urged, if other motives have not co-operated, to awaken the apprehensions of churchmen; and that the objections to this questionable channel of circulation, have been gradually transferred to the act of circulation itself.

You may, perhaps, think it presumptuous in me, to attempt any further discussion of a subject which has been so long and warmly debated; but, in an endeavour to elucidate, or to obviate the influence of prejudice, upon the judgment, in questions connected with

religion, it is impossible to avoid adverting to this unhappy controversy; associated, as it has been, either directly or incidentally, with every other ground of religious division.

And you will probably think it paradoxical, as well as presumptuous, if I should ground my apology for these remarks, upon the very circumstances which might be objected as a proof of incompetency, — upon a deficiency of those opportunities for direct observation, which a personal connexion with the institution might supply, and a consequent exemption from the partialities which are supposed to be inseparable from such a connexion, — upon the obscurity which has enabled me to view the contest, at a safe and humble distance, — and upon the ignorance of controversial tactics, and freedom from professional engagements, which have left me at liberty to consider the arguments on either side, in their insulated strength and evidence, and abstractedly (so far as my own prejudices have allowed), from any relative or local application.

Adieu.

LETTER XVI.

THE BIBLE SOCIETY.

THE SAME SUBJECT CONTINUED. — JEALOUSY ENTERTAINED BY THE CHURCH, OF THE BIBLE SOCIETY. — UNION WITH IT, THE BEST SECURITY AGAINST THE DANGERS APPREHENDED. — REAL DANGER TO THE CHURCH, CONSISTS IN THE REVULSION OF SENTIMENT PRODUCED IN THE ADVOCATES OF THE BIBLE SOCIETY, BY THE VEHEMENCE OF SOME OF ITS OPPONENTS. — PRINCIPLE OF THE SOCIETY NOT OBJECTED TO, IN ITS FOREIGN RELATIONS. — DOMESTIC OBJECTIONS. — ASSOCIATION WITH DISSENTERS. — ENCOURAGEMENT OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY AND CONCEIT. — CONSEQUENT ALIENATION FROM THE CHURCH AND MINISTRY. — EXAMINATION OF THESE OBJECTIONS, AND OF OTHERS CONNECTED WITH THEM. — JEALOUSY ENTERTAINED BY THE FRIENDS OF THE ELDER SOCIETIES. — NO NECESSARY INCOMPATIBILITY OF INTEREST, BETWEEN THEM. — PROOF OF THIS, IN THE SIMULTANEOUS GROWTH AND PROSPERITY OF VARIOUS CHARITABLE INSTITUTIONS.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

It would be foreign to my purpose, and beyond my ability, to enter minutely into the original constitution of the Bible Society; or to enquire how far it contained within itself, the seeds of those divisions which it unfortunately appears to have oc-

casioned. After so much discussion on both sides, has left this point still unsettled, and so much additional difficulty has arisen from the confusion of the actual object of this society, with its adventitious effects, nothing remains, but to take up the question upon its present ground; and assuming, (what is, alas! too evident,) that our venerable establishment is beset with many and great dangers, from the spirit generated by this unhappy controversy, to state, as briefly as possible, a few of those prominent points, in which prejudice appears to have widened the breach, sometimes by a deviation from the original question, and sometimes by the spirit of reciprocal jealousy that necessarily enters into every controversy in which human passions and interests are involved.

However the origin of this institution may have been considered as unpropitious to unity, in the first instance, the anxiety of its early promoters, to ally it intimately with the Church, cannot be denied; and it is not, perhaps, sufficiently remembered,

that it was the *proposition*, not the *formation*, of the society, that originated with the Dissenters. The chairman of the meeting that established it, was a very zealous Churchman; the office of president was filled by a Churchman; and four prelates of distinguished character, were elected vice-presidents; the Dissenters unanimously declining to consider their interests as distinct, or to appoint, from their respective communities, any members, as their peculiar representatives. The great preponderance of Church interest, in the committee, (of whom half were to be members of the Establishment, and to which every clerical member of the society, had a privilege of admission, in right of his profession,) should also be taken into the account; and it may likewise be suggested, that the principle of association with Christians of other persuasions, seems in fact the only one, upon which so comprehensive a society could be formed; and that if the proposition of such an alliance, could not consistently be *made* by the Establishment, it might very fairly have been *accepted*.

But however this point may be decided, it is unhappily not to be denied, though the fact has been greatly and injuriously exaggerated, that the exertions which have been made, through the labours of this society, to promote universally, the circulation and study of the Bible, have not been attended with so much advantage to the interests of the national Church, as might have been expected by all who hold the doctrines of that Church, to be the doctrines of Scripture, and her foundation, the sure promises of God. This seems a bold and dangerous paradox ; and a direct contradiction to what I have ventured to state as one of the first principles of the Reformation ; viz. that a knowledge of the Bible, as the fountain of Christian hope, and the rule of Christian practice, should be freely communicated to every follower of Christ.

But, if such be actually the fact, it is surely worth while to inquire from whence it originates, and to vindicate what we hold to be the soundest branch of the Christian church, from the disgraceful imputation of

being hostile to the diffusion of knowledge, and fearful of the progress of truth. Such is the reproach, as unfounded as it is disgraceful, which her enemies are endeavouring to build upon those precautions with which she has deemed it necessary to guard her circulation of the Bible: and I fear it cannot be denied, that her friends have unintentionally contributed to give some plausibility to this reproach, by not sufficiently distinguishing the great and prominent object of circulating the Scriptures, (the advantages of which can never be questionable with the thinking members of a Scriptural Church,) from the incidental inconveniences which must arise, in a country blessed like ours, with civil and religious freedom, out of the collision of views and opinions, which that very freedom excites and encourages. Against such inconveniences, it is indeed necessary to guard, by a constant and vigilant attention on the part of the ministers and members of the Establishment; and a readiness to assist the religious enquiries of their brethren, with faithful and orthodox expositions of Scrip-

ture, — under which description, the incomparably beautiful and Scriptural formularies of our own church, should undoubtedly hold the first place. But it is equally necessary, to guard against that exclusive and intolerant orthodoxy, which would appear to try the Bible by the Church, rather than the Church by the Bible; and which would subject the freest and purest and most enlightened Church in Christendom, to the imputation of seeking her support in the revival of a corruption which was one of the chief grounds of her dissent from the Romish religion, and which can only be the refuge of wilful error or interested ambition.

Whatever may have been the cause, it is a melancholy fact, that the exercise and extension of this Christian and Protestant privilege of direct examination of the Scriptures, and the great increase of zeal for their circulation, have not been productive of the spirit of Christian unity; and that an institution apparently so admirably calculated for the diffusion of peace and virtue through

the world, has been made the instrument of discord and jealousy ; the principle, not of attraction, but of alienation. It seems indeed to have come, (as the Divine Author of our religion, mysteriously said of himself,) not to send peace on earth, but a sword,—to divide the father against the son, and the brother against the brother,—and to scatter the brands of polemical contention over every quarter of our land. Its advocates and its opponents, have, with equal zeal and vehemence, supported their respective opinions ; and Christian charity seems to have been forgotten, in the anxiety to establish and extend the knowledge of Christian truth. These unhappy consequences could not surely have resulted from the diffusion of Scripture alone, nor from any Society, rightly constituted and rightly understood, which has the diffusion of Scripture alone, for its object. They must, therefore, be traced, either to some defect in the constitution, or error in the proceedings, of this society, or to some misapprehension of its real nature and objects, in the minds of those who oppose it. It has been

said by those who seem to have considered the subject most dispassionately, that they appear to have originated in both ; — that, on the one hand, they may be traced to the injudicious and indiscriminate zeal of individuals, insensibly associating other objects and ideas, with the great principle of the institution ; and, on the other, to that jealousy of innovation and unauthorized interference, which is natural in every existing establishment, and watchful, in proportion to the importance of the objects which such establishments are designed to promote.

It has been said, and apparently with sufficient reason, that if, on the very first formation of the Bible Society, the whole strength and influence of the Church had been thrown into it, and the cause of the Establishment and the Bible identified, this society would have been found its most powerful auxiliary, as the holy book which it proposes to circulate, is its best foundation ; and the efforts of sectarians, to extend the influence of their respective opinions,

would have been obstructed by their differences amongst themselves, and by the law of the society, which restricted their members in the committee, from exceeding that of the members of the established Church.

With respect to the foreign operations of the society, little seems to have been objected, but the romantic generosity of the scheme, and the imprudence of directing into such channels, the national bounty which was so much wanted at home. However reasonable this objection might have appeared, in the infancy of this society, the rapid extension, not only of this, but of many other charities, has abundantly demonstrated, that the capacity for benevolent exertion, will increase with the habit of it, and that however the funds so appropriated, may have been obtained, they have not been subtracted from the treasury of other useful or charitable institutions.

The *principle* of distribution, (without note or comment,) as it relates to foreign

countries, was obviously the only one which could have been adopted. The introduction of any Commentary with the Scriptures, would have been resisted by every foreign Church; and the society, by printing in each of the continental languages, from some *known* and *accredited* version of the Scriptures, has proved that the diffusion of local peculiarities, whether sectarian or national, formed no part of its plan. In fact, if such a measure had been possible or prudent, some of the dissenting sects might have claimed the privilege of interpretation for foreign countries, more consistently than the Church of England; as their schemes assimilate more nearly, with those of the continental Churches.

In the work of evangelizing the heathen, who may be said to have their forms of Christianity to chuse, it is unquestionably the duty, and the privilege, of the Church, to accompany the Scriptures with every possible aid of catechetical and missionary instruction. And to this, the Bible Society, though it cannot contribute in its *collective*

capacity, is so far from objecting, that its Church members are amongst the most zealous promoters of every institution for such purposes.

Amongst the objections, that have, from time to time, been urged against this institution, (so far as relates to its domestic objects,) the most prominent are — the association which it requires with sectarians ; — the sufficiency for the interpretation of Scripture, which it is supposed to attribute to individuals ; — the advantages for diffusing their own opinions, which the institution gives to its dissenting ministers ; — and the alienation from their regular ministers, and from the discipline of their national church, which this independent system of reading and interpreting the Scripture, for themselves, is supposed to produce amongst the people.

These objections, by frequent repetition, and by the gradual exaggeration which the jealousy of controversy always excites, have been magnified into an importance beyond

their original character. The open constitution of the society, has been supposed to proceed from, and in its turn to generate, latitudinarian principles. Its independent character, as the ally, but not the instrument, of the national Church, has been represented as inconsistent with ecclesiastical subordination. Its assertion of the sufficiency of Scripture, as a rule of faith, and a guide to salvation, has been construed into an assertion of the sufficiency of every man, to explain and apply the Scripture, not only for himself, but for his neighbour; and its determination to circulate the Scripture alone, which was, in fact, the only way in which it could be circulated by such a society, has been represented as artfully depreciating all authorized or accredited exposition, and undermining the national church, by bringing her formularies into gradual discredit and disuse.

The vehemence with which these objections have been urged by the opponents of the society, has produced in its advocates, a revulsion of sentiment; in which the real

danger to the Church, appears to me to consist. The attempt to identify the truth of Scripture exclusively with the national establishment, has been adduced as an assumption of that infallibility which she refuses to allow to another Church ; while the apparent inconsistency of not trusting to Scripture alone for her defence, has been supposed to indicate a consciousness of some hostility in Scripture, to her claims. This inference, unjust and injurious as it is, has been earnestly pressed by the enemies of the Church ; — of whom there are many, both in this society, and out of it ; of whom there will still be many in the country, so long as the private interest of individuals is opposed to any of its legal provisions ; and of whom, in fact, every national establishment must find or create many, so long as pride, and avarice, and selfishness continue to be features of the human character.

The first objection to the constitution of the society, viz. the association which it requires with sectarians, — the unnatural coalition, as it has been called, with here-

tics, — is abundantly obviated by the manifest insufficiency of any other plan to accomplish the object. And it may perhaps be questioned, whether this exclusive assumption of orthodoxy, and universal reprobation of dissent, are quite consistent, on the part of a Church which has claimed the right of regenerating itself, and of separating from the great, but corrupted body, of which it formerly constituted a part, and by which, it has been classed with those very heretics, from whose contact it now so sensitively shrinks ?

The example of the primitive Church, which is said to have refused to hold religious intercourse with heretics, has been pleaded in support of this objection; but such an example cannot be assumed as applicable to the present case, unless “religious intercourse” be proved to mean, a partnership in the circulation of the Scriptures. In fact, it appears, that one of the charges made against the early heretics, was, that they endeavoured to suppress, or curtail, or interpolate, the Scriptures. If

they had been willing to distribute them, in all their fulness and integrity, it seems impossible, that any objection could have been made to uniting with them, in such a work. If the Apostle could rejoice that Christ was preached, though of contention, even when the hostility of the rival teachers was expressly directed against himself, it is not likely that the "preaching Christ," so long as it was secured by the transmission of the genuine Scriptures, would have been opposed by the most zealous of his successors. And if there can be any security on earth, that Christ shall be preached Scripturally and soundly, it must be in the universal diffusion of that Gospel, which an angel from Heaven is pronounced "accursed," if he shall alter.

The sufficiency for the private interpretation of Scripture, which the principle of the Bible Society is supposed to attribute to every individual, appears an objection not fairly deducible from this principle; unless it could be proved that any rules of the society, discourage or preclude the use

of human aid, in the study of Scripture, or interfere with individual or associated exertions for the diffusion of explanatory tracts and comments. It is not, surely, a fair representation of the case, to say that, by this mode of circulating the Bible, every peasant or mechanic is encouraged to chuse a religion for himself. Every peasant, and every reader of the Bible, is indeed encouraged, to believe that here the principle of all true religion, is to be found, to study this Divine volume, as the guide of his conduct, and to prize it, as the charter of his privileges, and the foundation of his hope. But if there be one lesson more than another, which the humble and honest inquirer will learn from the perusal of his Bible, it is that of avoiding vain questions, which gender strife, and submitting to those who are over him, in the Lord.

Very different consequences, however, have been anticipated by some who have entered most warmly into this controversy; and in apprehension of these consequences, the practical influence of the study of Scripture, has sometimes been kept out of sight,

the difficulties or obscurities in the scheme of Revelation, have been magnified, and certain preparatory qualifications, not of the heart and affections, but of external circumstance and situation, have been required for the reception of its truths. While the liberty of searching the Scriptures, has been formally acknowledged, as the inalienable right of every individual, it has been proposed to withhold them systematically, from those who can only possess them through the bounty of their Christian brethren;—from the poor,—from the very class, to whom, it is emphatically said, our Saviour came to preach;—from the heathen,—of whom it is prophetically announced, that they shall be given to the Lord, for his inheritance;—from the savage*,

* One writer in this controversy, expressly asserts, that "Christianity was not intended for man in a savage state;" and he quotes the authority of Doctor Lardner, in support of his opinion. How this opinion is to be reconciled with our Lord's injunction, "Go ye out into the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature," this writer does not explain. Neither does he remark upon the peculiar and emphatical character of the Gospel, noticed above, that it was to be preached to "the Poor." Christianity did indeed *arise* in the midst of the civilized

or barbarian*, (as he was designated by the presumption of antiquity,) to whom the Apostle expressly declares himself a debtor!

and learned world; and it was necessary that it should there *arise*, to afford a theatre for the open exhibition of its miracles, and to furnish opportunity for the full investigation of its evidences. But these authenticated, and proved, and the proof confirmed by the communication of similar powers to the first preachers of the Gospel, it does not appear, from any account that remains of their missionary labours, that they were deterred from entering upon any new field of conversion, by the apprehension of insufficient previous cultivation.

On the contrary, it would rather appear, that their fears were, — of the influence of *over* civilization, — of those vain thoughts and high imaginations which the pride of heathen philosophy or Jewish prejudice might suggest, and which they often found it necessary to combat with the strongest argument, and the most pointed reprehension.

The fact seems to be, that the progress of the Apostles in the work of evangelizing the world, was limited only by the length of their lives, and the extent of their opportunities. Their course was through the midst of the civilized nations which *surrounded* them; and the Apologies of the primitive Christians, as well as the other records of ecclesiastical history, prove, beyond dispute, that no part of the then known world was *designedly* left unvisited, or supposed to be disqualified by ignorance and barbarism, for the reception of the Gospel.

* Though the epithet of *barbarian* was sometimes applied by the Greeks, only with a reference to the dif-

But it is by changing gradually, and, as it were, insensibly, the ground of their objections, that the opponents of the Bible Society have generally strengthened their own prejudices, and excited a counter-prejudice in the minds of its advocates. To the question, as to the prudence of distributing the Scriptures, through such an association, has succeeded a doubt, whether it be prudent to distribute the unexplained Scriptures *at all*; and the necessity of comment and exposition, has been so earnestly pressed, as to lead to an inference, that Scripture does not, of itself, afford sufficient direction for salvation; or that a separation from the national (and, as we believe, the purest, branch of the) church, must be the necessary result of an unassisted perusal of the Bible.

But the true ground of apprehension from the unlimited circulation of Scripture,

ference of language and country, it ~~was~~ often used in its more general application, and is evidently so used by the Apostle, in this place.

does not seem to be, that the people, unassisted, will necessarily misinterpret it, but that being brought into contact and connexion with persons who hold erroneous interpretations, and are employed as distributors, of the Scripture, they will be subjected to the influence of such persons, and led to adopt their views and opinions.

Against such a consequence, there is no security, but in the zeal of the national clergy. While they liberally distribute the Bible, with one hand, and the sound expositions of the Church, with the other, they will find their strength grow with the extent of their foundations; and the people, whom they encourage to search the Scriptures, will be willing to search them, under their direction. But if ground or pretence be given, for the dangerous insinuation, which some ill-affected persons do not hesitate to suggest, that the desire to withhold the text, arises from a doubt of the soundness of the commentary, — if assertions be made of difficulties in Scripture, leading necessarily and inevitably to misinterpret-

ation, in the hands of the illiterate reader*,—a recollection will immediately arise, of the conduct and arguments of *another* Church, and a very injurious parallel will naturally be drawn.

In the open constitution of the Bible Society, uniting all classes and denominations of Christians, in the circulation of that Holy Book which is the foundation of their common faith, and professing to exclude from its plan, every local prejudice and sectarian distinction, a warm imagination is pleased with anticipating the union of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, in the adoration of God and of the Lamb, — of which, this institution presents a faint resemblance, and for which, it seems to prepare the foundation. But experience has proved, that it is extremely difficult, if not altogether impossible, to separate the general interests of Christianity, in the minds of the votaries of its respective forms, from

* See (for this objection) the publications of the Rev. Mr. O'Callaghan and others.

those peculiar views and impressions which each party has been taught to hold as the truth. Experience has proved, that, in our own country, at least, the diffusion of Scripture without note or comment, though strictly adhered to by the parent society, is not left to a fair trial of its unbiassed operation upon the minds of the people ; but is accompanied with the active and extensive circulation (through other channels,) of Tracts, professing to be explanatory of its doctrines, and illustrative of its precepts, or sometimes of compositions recommendatory of some sectarian distinction.

It has been accordingly, asserted, by some who apprehend injury to the Church, from this institution, and must, indeed, be acknowledged, even by its warmest admirers, that while its dissenting members have protested against the circulation of Church expositions, as infringing their fundamental law of impartiality, they have not scrupled, each within the sphere of his own influence, to propagate the tenets of their respective societies, by every variety

of interesting composition, that zeal could suggest, or ingenuity could devise. But, shall the Churchman blame them for this?—Shall he not acknowledge, that necessity is laid upon them, to preach what they hold to be the Gospel of Christ? And, if he believe that they have conceived erroneous views of that Gospel, shall he not feel it his imperative and indispensable duty, to emulate, nay, to exceed, their zeal and activity in disseminating the sound and Scriptural doctrines of his own Church? This duty, indeed, is now fully acknowledged, and assiduously discharged, not only by many pious individuals amongst the ministers and members of the Church, who are connected with the Bible Society, but by the venerable and elder institution, which, next to the Bible on which our Church is built, is our firmest ally and support.

One of the most plausible objections made to the universal circulation of the Scriptures, is, that “all the *fanatics* appeal to them, for a vindication of their opinions, and a justification of their atrocities.” I

will not stop to comment upon the unfairness of a general application of this epithet, which is rather descriptive of individual temper, than of collective or speculative distinctions; but allowing that there may possibly have appeared some ground for the observation, it may generally be replied, that such opinions have been imbibed, and such atrocities committed, not in consequence of the quiet and diligent study of Scripture, but under the influence of fanatical teachers, operating upon the ignorance and credulity of those to whom the Bible was very imperfectly known, and dealing out its sublime truths and precepts, with a partial or sophistical application. It is not, here, the *want* of comment upon Scripture, so much as the *false* comment, that is dangerous; and *oral* comment is, perhaps, the most dangerous of any; because it excites and interests the imagination and the passions, and in a manner, incapacitates for free consideration and impartial judgment.

But, in fact, there is no such thing as the literal study of the Bible without note or

comment. Every man who reads his Bible, will talk of it, and will find a comment, in the conversation of his neighbour. Every pious man who distributes the Bible, will wish that those to whom it is given, shall read it, and will naturally be disposed to impress his own interpretation, or to recommend those helps which he has found beneficial to himself. In this state of things, which is irremediable, and which, in a free and literary country, it would not, perhaps, be desirable to remedy, the obvious and indispensable duty of Churchmen, is zealously to circulate their own sound expositions, in connexion with the sacred text itself; and it may confidently be trusted, that with zeal and talents, and learning and authority, and the testimony of Scripture, on their side, they will finally triumph over every attempt to undermine the venerable fabric of which they are the legal and constituted guardians.

Yet this, by the way, is, in one respect, a disadvantage, which, where a perfect freedom of religious profession is enjoyed, must

always excite a certain degree of prejudice against the labours of an established ministry. There is an appearance of disinterested kindness, in the communication of gratuitous instruction, which gives the irregular preacher a vast advantage ; not that his labours are not remunerated by his followers, but that such remuneration being casual, and (at least apparently) optional, it comes rather in the shape of a benevolence, than a reward ; and seems to establish him in the character of a spiritual friend, while the regular minister is considered as a legal stipendiary.

This inconvenience, inseparable from an establishment, diminishes the popularity of the clergy, without any fault of their own, and subjects their most zealous and disinterested exertions, to the misconstructions of jealousy and prejudice. Strange as it may seem, it is undoubtedly true, that a boldness of expostulation, and severity of reproof, a freedom of enquiry into the spiritual state, and a closeness of direct and personal application to the feelings and con-

science, which would not be tolerated in the parochial minister, are received with humble and submissive acquiescence from those who can claim no commission to teach, but that which they derive from their own zeal, and the voluntary attachment and confidence of their hearers.

After all, the apprehension that the influence of the dissenting sects, in propagating their opinions, will be strengthened by the circulation of the Bible through their hands, must rest upon one of two positions. Either, that the testimony of the Bible is decidedly favourable to those opinions, or that the zeal of the dissenters, in the work of conversion, is more active than that of the Church. The first of these positions, every Churchman will deny; the second, the conduct of every Churchman ought to disprove. And those who complain of the proselyting zeal, which, through schools, and missions, and Tract associations, is supposed to be labouring for the subversion of the Establishment, are not, surely, precluded from employing, and to a much

greater extent, the very same instruments, in its defence.

It is not, however, upon the principle of exclusion, but upon the basis of united charity and firmness, that our Church can build her security. It is not by schools of controversy but by schools of Church discipline and piety combined, that she can confirm the allegiance of her younger members. It is, by going with every other Christian society, as far as she conscientiously can, and going no farther than she ought, with any ; it is, by ever holding in view, the Bible, as the sole foundation of her faith, and urging the reception and authority of her formularies, only upon the evidence of that foundation. It is, by fairly and candidly distinguishing that which is expedient, from that which is authoritative, and allowing the possible separability of vital and fundamental truths, from peculiarities of local and external administration.

The apprehension of danger to the Church, from the spirit of independence and insub-

ordination which the study of the unexplained Bible, is supposed necessarily to produce, is built upon the assumption, and, indeed, upon the express assertion, that the disputes between the Church and the sectaries, cannot be decided by a reference to the Bible alone, — that “in support of episcopacy, infant baptism, and some other tenets, she refers to the concurrent voice of antiquity, and the universal practice of the primitive Church, as historical comments on the sacred volume.” Admitting this to be true, it rather affords an argument to stimulate the zeal of the Church, than to disprove the necessity or expediency of circulating the Bible. It is conceded on all hands, that the controversy between protestants and Roman catholics, may be decided by the Bible alone; and it is acknowledged to be desirable, that the latter, of all classes, should be, by all possible means, encouraged and persuaded to read the Bible. In this distinction, one important circumstance appears to be forgotten; viz. that the Church of England considers as *fundamental*, only those points which

may be decided by Scripture, — that, as “Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation, so whatsoever is not found therein, or may not be proved thereby, it is not required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of faith.”

The distinction, as clearly as we can collect it, seems to stand thus :—Though the controversy with the Romanists, as turning upon fundamentals, may safely be left to the decision of Scripture alone, the questions in dispute with the protestant dissenters, involving a reference to other authorities, (and consequently, if the determination of our Church be true, *not* being fundamental,) cannot safely or successfully be investigated, but under the direction of the authorized ministers of the Church. But it should be remembered, that before the Romanists can engage in the study of Scripture, they must be guilty of that very breach of discipline which is so much deprecated by the opponents of this Society. They must throw off, altogether, the authority of their ministers, whose

apostolic and derivative institution in the Church of Christ, is acknowledged by our clergy, as the channel through which their own commission has been transmitted.

It involves, however, no breach of subordination, in the members of a protestant episcopal Church, to receive the Bible, and the Bible alone, as an *authoritative* standard of doctrine. It is on the foundation of this very principle, that our protestant episcopal Church is built; and it was in defence of this principle, that our venerable episcopal reformers sacrificed their lives. The points, in fact, on which the Church and the dissenters are at issue, (at least those which are particularly dwelt upon in this controversy, and are supposed to require the collateral evidence and elucidation of history,) are not points of faith, but of discipline, — *not* questions of what is *necessary* to be done and believed, *in order to salvation*, but questions as to what system of external administration is most consonant to the primitive constitution of the Church. It is acknowledged by every protestant, that a

right apprehension upon these points, is not absolutely essential to salvation, though it is highly desirable, to preserve the unity, and promote the prosperity, of the Church. If, therefore, it were even a probable consequence, that the unassisted study of the Bible, would leave the judgment on these points undecided, or that erroneous conclusions might be drawn from the short and obscure notices of Scripture, this would surely be an evil of much less magnitude, than those which a restriction of the privilege of searching the Scriptures, would occasion.

But does it appear, that from the simple study of the Bible, these uncertain or erroneous conclusions would actually follow? It is not fair to argue in this case, from the influence of sectarian expositions supervening upon the distribution of the Bible, because this influence may be, and ought to be, counteracted by the zeal and activity of the Church. But laying out of the question, exposition on either side, and supposing the (otherwise) uninformed reader

to derive his ideas exclusively from his Bible, — what, for instance, is the impression likely to be made, respecting the two points particularly specified, episcopacy, and infant baptism?

On the latter, a difficulty may, indeed, arise, from the observation, that adult baptism alone is expressly mentioned in Scripture. But this will be immediately obviated by a reference to the accounts of whole households baptized, amongst whom, infants must have been included. It may also be observed, that by no collateral authority, is infant baptism maintained to be of universal and indispensable obligation, but rather established by inference, as “most agreeable to the institution of Christ.”

This question, however, is, from its nature, so much abstracted from the influence of those interests and passions, which enter so largely into other controverted points, that, unless where the discussion of it, has been combined (as has been sometimes the

case,) with some peculiarity of doctrine, it appears to have made few separatists from the Church, and to have seldom (in modern times) awakened the scruples of her more humble and illiterate members.*

The objection, that our established form of Church government is likely to be endangered by the exertions of this Society, can hardly, upon any fair principle of reasoning, refer to its rule of circulating the Bible alone. If there be any foundation

* The disputes on this point, which occurred at the Reformation, afford no exception to the above remark. The knowledge of Scripture was then recent and imperfect, and the current of controversy strong; and considerable prejudice was probably excited by the popish abuses of the doctrine of baptismal regeneration.

The opinions of the Quakers respecting the sacraments, are of too recent a date in the Church, to lead to any apprehension, that they have arisen, or are likely to arise, from the study of the Bible alone (though, if this were the case, it would afford a strong presumption in their favour). The moderate and unobtrusive character of this sect, and their doctrine of the necessity of a special and personal illumination, for the right understanding and application of Scripture, seem likely to prevent their often assuming the office of commentators.

for this objection, it must rest upon the supposed influence and zeal of the sectarian members, in diffusing hostile expositions. For it surely does not appear quite consistent in the Churchman, who contends for the *apostolic* origin of episcopacy, to object to the unassisted reading of the Scriptures as likely (of itself) to bring this point into question. On the contrary, it would rather appear, that such a practice was most likely to establish the doctrine of the Church upon the subject. The office of Bishop, as president or superintendant in the Church, is expressly mentioned by the apostle; and it requires some acquaintance with ecclesiastical history, to know the different views which have been taken of the real meaning of this denomination. To the unlettered reader, the name as it stands in our translation, would probably be conclusive, if he considered the question of church government at all. But as it is one in which the laity have but a minor interest, and which is allowed not to be of fundamental importance, it is not likely to be very generally discussed by private individuals,

unless when it is brought into prominence by their instructors.

Even if it were admitted, that some disaffection to episcopal government exists in all the dissenting societies, and is inculcated, sometimes from jealousy, and sometimes from principle, however mistaken, — it is obvious that the testimony of *Scripture*, on the subject, is a question altogether distinct; and that a society, which *limits* its operations to the diffusion of this testimony, cannot be radically hostile to a system avowedly founded upon it. It is, indeed, through other channels than the fair operations of the Bible Society, that the opposition to episcopacy, must flow : and it is by exertions very different from the partial or reluctant communication of the Bible to the people, that the principles of episcopacy must be defended.

And may not the episcopalian fairly object to this claim of extraneous and collateral evidence in favour of an institution which he holds to be apostolical? Does

there not appear something like a fallacy, or at least a certain obscurity, in identifying its claim of apostolic authority with its privilege of legal establishment? Is not the former, a point of religious opinion, determinable by the evidence of Scripture, and the latter, a point of conventional regulation, involving other views and considerations? And is not this obscurity observable in the line of argument which some writers on this question have pursued, * in discus-

* An instance of this obscurity (in the involution of two points essentially distinct,) occurs in one of the pamphlets published upon the Bible controversy. In referring to the history of our English Reformation, and the various considerations, political and prudential, as well as religious, which influenced the conduct and views of our Reformers, the writer observes, — “ Here was much more to engage the attention, than “ the mere compilation of a creed. — The reformation of “ England was not to be completed, like that of a petty “ German town, by assembling a few *Gospellers*, and “ drawing up a confession of Faith. * The peace of a

* This contemptuous language can hardly refer to such Protestant documents as the confession of Augsburg, signed by five Sovereign Princes, and by deputies from two Imperial cities; or to the other declarations of the continental Reformers presented at the same diet.

sing the grounds of expediency and authority, as applicable to the episcopal form of Church government legally established in this country ?

“ great nation was to be consulted, a constitution in Church and State preserved, and the great ecclesiastical fabric to be transplanted *entire*, to a new, and a firmer base.”

Acknowledging, in one sense, the truth of this distinction, and admiring, as highly as the author can do, the moderation, prudence, and piety, with which our venerable Reformers accomplished this arduous work, may we not venture to observe a little inconsistency in the statement, and a *variation*, *inaccurate* at least, in the sense apparently given to the word *Reformation* in this passage ? — In the latter clause, the Author expressly admits, that it was for the *transplantation* of the *National Establishment*, not for the reformation of the National Faith, that the union of the statesman and the ecclesiastic became necessary, and political and prudential considerations claimed a share in the deliberations of the Reformers. — But, in fact, wherever Protestantism was *legally* established on the Continent, and its maintenance provided for by public authority, a similar interference of statesmen is to be found, *whatsoever* may have been the form of Church discipline adopted : † and the Reformation, generally ascending

† For proof of the above, see Mosheim's account of the establishment of the Reformation in Saxony, Denmark, and Sweden, by John Frederick, Christian III., and Gustavus Vasa.

Indeed, however highly and justly the advocates of episcopacy may rate its authority as an apostolic institution, there does not appear any apostolic authority or precedent, (nay there could not, under the circumstances of the times,) for what in our day is called an Establishment,—the incorporation of the religion of the state, with its government, and the allotment of a specific fund, for the maintenance of a body of ministers. This must, therefore, it would seem, be best supported on the grounds of expediency and analogy;—of expediency, by arguments of the necessity of such a provision, to the advancement and integrity

from the People to their Governors, seems in our own country, to have pursued the same course; though some peculiar circumstances accelerated its establishment by legal authority. Many of our earlier and more obscure English reformers laboured and suffered in the same cause, of which Cranmer was afterwards the champion and the martyr: and it should be remembered, that he and his venerable companions were exactly what would be here called obscure *Gospellers*, before their elevation to the highest rank in the Church, gave them the power of contributing effectively to the work of general reformation.

of religion ; — and of analogy, by the proof of its consistency with the Divine government, in the case of the Jews, where God was pleased especially to reveal his will : as well as from a reference to the general practice of antiquity ; — a practice derived apparently from the patriarchal times, when the sovereign and the pontifical dignity were united in the head of the tribe or family.

The alliance of the ecclesiastical and civil establishments in this country, has been ably defended both by politicians and divines : and the title of the Church of England to the protection of the state, has been proved, not only on the ground of the Scriptural fidelity of her doctrine, (which to the Christian statesman would have been proof sufficient,) but from the peculiar adaptation of her free, but prudently graduated, system of discipline, to the principles of the British constitution.*

* “ It is the glory of the Church of England,” (says Blackstone,) “ that she inculcates due obedience to lawful authority ; and hath been in her principles and

There is indeed one class of Protestant Dissenters, with whom our controversy is of a different character; as it affects the fundamental doctrine on which our Christian hope of salvation, is built. But surely here, if any where, we may safely rest upon Scriptural testimony alone; and we should consider it as no small advantage, that while these separatists are obliged to resort to new translations and interpretations of Scripture, for a defence of their opinions, they contribute to circulate, in our autho-

“ practice, ever most unquestionably loyal. The clergy
“ of her persuasion, holy in their doctrines, and unblemished in their lives and conversation, are also moderate in their ambition; and entertain just notions of the ties of society, and the rights of civil government. As in matters of faith and morality, they acknowledge no guide but the Scriptures, so, in matters of external polity and private right, they derive all their title from the civil magistrate.”

It was not till some weeks after these volumes were sent to the press, that the writer had an opportunity of seeing an admirable “ Essay upon the Necessity of a Church Establishment,” by the Rev. Samuel Charles Wilks—a work so peculiarly suited to the character and exigencies of the present times, that it would be injustice to the public, to withhold from it, the praise it deserves.

rised version, the strongest evidence against them.

And this rule of the Bible Society, you will observe, coincides precisely, with that, under which the first public permission for the free use of the Bible, was granted at the Reformation.

“ There was nothing,” says Bishop Burnet, (Hist. Reform. vol. i. p. 202.) “ which
“ could so much recover Reformation, that
“ was declining so fast, as the free use of the
“ Scriptures ; and though these had been set
“ up in the Churches, a year ago, yet he
“ (Cranmer) pressed, and now procured
“ leave, for private persons to buy Bibles, and
“ to keep them in their houses. This was
“ granted by letters patent directed to Crom-
“ well, bearing date the 13th of November,
“ 1539: the substance of which was, that ‘ the
“ king was desirous to have his subjects at-
“ tain the knowledge of God’s word : which
“ could not be effected by any means so well,
“ as by granting them the free and liberal
“ use of the Bible in the English tongue :

*“ which, to avoid dissension, he intended should
“ pass among them, only by one translation.”*

I shall only notice one farther objection, connected in some degree, with those already stated; but which seems to involve consequences still more injurious,—as it places this Society, in a posture of opposition to those great institutions previously existing, whose attachment to the national religion, was unquestionable, whose zeal for the diffusion of the Scriptures, had been eminent, and whose *preferable* claim to the patronage of the Church, in the event of a *competition*, could not be denied.

To such an objection, it was an obvious, and might have been a sufficient, reply, that in such a cause, too much exertion was impossible; and that every additional institution for such a purpose, should have been considered as a partner, and not as a rival;—that it is with new religious Societies, as with new religious books,—their use is not to promulgate truths before unknown, or to propose new rules of duty, but to stimulate zeal

which security has paralyzed,—to establish doctrines which habitual acquiescence has admitted upon authority, rather than upon evidence,—to improve the speculative belief of Revelation, into a practical and operative conviction,—and to enforce, by a reference to their first principles, and an appeal to their divine original, those eternal and immutable obligations of morality, which infidelity, and man's natural corruption, are ever at work to undermine. New books will be read, when older and better, are forgotten; and new Societies will be patronized, when others are unnoticed; not from any capricious or illiberal preference, but from the simple circumstance of their novelty. As often, then, as the enemies of Religion vary and multiply their attacks, so often should her friends vary and multiply their defences; and every *honest* aid—I had almost said *art*,—of novelty, and popularity, and fashion, and influence, may lawfully be resorted to, in support of their cause.

Under this view, the establishment of a new Society, for the circulation of the Bible,

does not appear to have been injudicious or unnecessary, even supposing those already existing, to have been in full and active operation: and as the chief object of this Society, was the diffusion of the Gospel, in foreign and heathen countries, it might have been expected to prosecute its labours, in conjunction with the elder institutions, the design of which was avowedly the communication of Scripture knowledge at home, or the extension of it to remote countries, connected in political interest with Great Britain.

But a spirit of rivalry has gradually arisen, which has stamped these Societies with a character of mutual hostility; and led some zealous advocates of each, to question the views, and censure the proceedings, of the other. It seems evident, that, whatever may have been the nature of its subsequent operations, or the result of a growing jealousy and irritation in the minds of some of its more sanguine members, neither the original plan of the Bible Society, nor any of its measures with re-

spect to the elder institutions, were framed under the influence of such a spirit. One of the first public domestic acts, was a friendly address to the Society for promoting Christian Knowledge, and another to a similar association in Dublin, established in connection with the Church. From the latter, we are told by the historian of the Society, a friendly reply was received ; but the former returned no answer.

It is impossible, without some farther knowledge of the private history of both Societies, to judge of the grounds upon which it was thought right to reject an advance apparently so cordial. The event, however, has sufficiently proved, that their interests are not of necessity, incompatible ; the energy and resources of the one, having grown with the extension of the other. This is, indeed, attributed by some, to the very rivalry in question. But if this rivalry were really its origin, though it would afford an additional proof that an alloy of evil will infuse itself into every work

of man, still the Christian may draw from it the apostolic consolation, that, from whatever motive, Christ is preached; and the Churchman may rejoice in the consequences of that emulation which has restored to the elder institutions, the attraction of novelty, and the energy of youth.

In truth, the spirit of emulation in good works, and especially in the support of religious and charitable associations, is so far from excluding co-operation with others, that it is its very root and principle. The rolls of many of our public Charities exhibit the same names, in a variety of combinations, and the fashion (if I may call it so) of collective, as well as of private, benevolence, extends itself under the influence of example, and readily falls into the channels which originating genius or piety has marked for its course.

You will remember, my dear friend, that I do not attempt any discussion of this controversy, farther than as it is connected

with our general subject. I have still a few observations to add, but this letter has run to such a length, that I must reserve them for a future occasion.

Yours, very faithfully.

LETTER XVII.

THE BIBLE SOCIETY.

THE SAME SUBJECT CONTINUED.—REVULSION OF SENTIMENT, PRODUCED BY THE OPPOSITION TO THE BIBLE SOCIETY. — DEPRECIATION OF ALL COMMENT UPON SCRIPTURE. — FALLACY OF THIS OBJECTION. — WARMTH OF BOTH PARTIES. — PRINCIPLE OF POPULAR ASSOCIATION, OBJECTED TO. — PURPOSES OF SUCH ASSOCIATION SHOULD BE CONSIDERED. — POSSIBILITY OF ABUSE, AND NECESSITY OF GUARDING AGAINST IT. — INDISCREET LANGUAGE AT PUBLIC MEETINGS;—HAS BEEN DISCOURAGED, AND MIGHT BE STILL FURTHER RESTRAINED. — FINAL TRIUMPH OF THE BIBLE SOCIETY, PROBABLE. — AND DESIRABLE, IN THE PRESENT STATE OF RELIGION. — THE CHURCH MIGHT HAVE STOOD, AND MIGHT YET STAND, AT THE HEAD OF THIS SOCIETY. — CONCLUSION.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

IN my last letter, I observed, that the vehemence with which objections had been urged by the opponents of the Bible Society, had produced in its advocates a revulsion of sentiment, in which the real danger to the Church, appeared to me to consist. That the attempt to identify the

truth of Scripture *exclusively* with the national Establishment, had been adduced, as an assumption of that infallibility, which she refuses to allow to another church; while the apparent inconsistency, of not trusting to Scripture alone, for her defence, had been supposed to indicate a consciousness of some hostility in Scripture, to her claims. Such, at least, is the conclusion which jealousy and prejudice are likely to draw, from these cautious proceedings of the Church;—a conclusion so plausible and natural, that no explanation, without a change of system, seems likely effectually to refute it; though many of the advocates of these proceedings most strenuously protest against such an interpretation, and assert, with perfect sincerity, that their anxiety for the diffusion of sound scriptural truth, is not inferior to that of their opponents.

The unfortunate objection, originally made to the distribution of the Bible without note or comment, and which might have been as fairly applied to any of the elder institutions, in every instance where

they circulated the Bible alone, has been met, by some advocates of the Bible Society, with an angry and indiscriminate depreciation of *all* human comment upon Scripture, as if it were rather an attempt to improve upon the wisdom of God, than an endeavour to assist the judgment of man. “Is “not the Almighty,” it has been triumphantly asked, “able to explain his own “meaning; and has he not promised, for “farther elucidation, to give his Holy Spirit to them that ask it?” — Upon any fair deductions from the principle of these objectors, all *preaching* would appear to be a presumptuous endeavour, to build with wood and stubble, upon the divine foundation, and an interference with the special province of that Spirit, who has been given to lead us into all truth. The whole of the exegetic office in the ministry of the Christian Church, from the primitive ages to the present, would be pronounced nugatory, if not pernicious; and the simple exercises of the catechist, the learned labours of the commentator, and the exhortation with which the faithful minister accompanies his

delivery of the Gospel message, would be all alike condemned, as the arrogant and self-exalting artifices of human pride and presumption.

But the fallacy of this objection to human comment (even in their own judgment) is proved abundantly, by the conduct of those who advance it ; and who fail not, by oral as well as written exposition, to communicate their own views of Scripture truth, as far as their influence extends. They must, therefore, upon the evidence of their own practice, if not of the practice of the universal Church, allow the advantage of such expositions ; and acknowledge, that it is the right, and the duty, of the Church of England, trusting as she does in her scriptural foundation, not, certainly, to withhold the sacred text, but to furnish the comment as extensively as she can.

And here, my dear friend, I cannot help observing, that some of the most excellent amongst our Churchmen, who have pleaded the cause of this Society, have incautiously

used expressions, which may be interpreted as depreciatory of our authorized formularies, while they seem to have respected the prejudices of every sect but their own. Within the Church, and within the Church only, has the language of mutual hostility been heard ; — of hostility, not confined to the differences of private opinion, with respect to the expediency of any proposed mode or channel of distribution, but involving in the controversy, and placing, as it were, in contrast, the Bible on the one hand, and the Prayer Book on the other. If the zeal of its Church advocates has exhibited such a contrast, can we be surprised, if that of the Dissenters has pursued it in its most mortifying application, and questioned the Scriptural foundation of a church, which appears to shrink from the test of a free examination ? Can we be surprised, if they anticipate the fall of a house thus divided against itself, especially when they perceive, that (as in the well-known spirit of civil wars) the ties of brotherhood serve but to embitter the competition ? Can we be surprised, if they observe little delicacy

in their animadversions upon the deficiencies of Churchmen, when we see Churchmen foremost in exhibiting their brethren as examples of such deficiency? Can we read, without pain, in familiar and fugitive pamphlets, or hear at public and promiscuous meetings, remarks, which would better suit the visitation sermon, or the episcopal charge?

It is but fair, however, to observe, that this jealousy is rapidly subsiding; that a growing spirit of charity and conciliation seems to have pervaded the later meetings of these Societies; and that a respectful and liberal allowance is made, for the scruples of a conscientious opposition. In the parent Societies, especially, in both kingdoms, every discussion of a personal or irritating nature, seems to be carefully avoided, and the comprehensive principle of the institution, inviolably maintained.

One of the most plausible, and apparently one of the fairest, objections to the Bible Society, is, that it encourages the principle

and the habit of popular associations, independent of the laws ; and that such associations cannot but be attended with great political danger. It would appear, however, that the *object* of any popular association, ought to be taken into the account, before its political effects can be calculated ; and it does happily appear, from experience, that no such ill effects have resulted from the Bible Society ; which has rather contributed to preserve its members from other associations, of a more questionable tendency.

A similar objection, I think, was urged against the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade ; which was represented as disaffected in its principle, if not revolutionary in its object. The origin of the prejudice, in both cases (for a strong prejudice was certainly felt by many who wanted neither candour nor piety), seems to have been, the fashion of popular associations for political purposes, which, about that time, originated in the French Revolution, and spread with such baneful rapidity through these king-

doms. The inconsiderate adoption of the forms and the technical language of these associations, — the introduction of certain expressions, which had derived, from their French application, a revolutionary meaning, — the style of neutrality, which it was thought prudent to assume, in endeavouring to engage all parties in support of their benevolent objects, — and the arts of their opponents, in pointing out these various circumstances, to animadversion, — all combined to expose the excellent founders of this Society, to much misrepresentation and obloquy ; and no small portion of both has attached to the Bible Society, upon grounds very nearly similar.

In many of the discussions, which have taken place upon this unfortunate controversy, the purpose of the Association has been kept out of sight, and the mere *fact* of association, has been urged as a sufficient objection. The vigilance, which might have found a better exercise, in preventing the abuses, has been employed in obstruct-

ing the objects, of this Society; the zeal and activity of its advocates, which ought to be the theme of our praise, and the object of our imitation, (if we believe that it is good to be zealously affected in a good thing,) have been stigmatized with the names of officiousness and enthusiasm; and the sober piety of the Establishment, has been contrasted with the vehemence of dissent, and the wildness of innovation.

It is not to the indication of such a contrast, that I object, for it ought to be pointed out wherever it exists, but it is to the indiscriminate imputation of sinister views and motives, to those who support and encourage this Society. Does not such a charge, if generally urged, indicate something like a want of charity or of prudence, and seem, at least, to warrant the retort, which is so loudly thrown upon us, that our attachment is to the garment and the fringes, (as the venerable Bishop Taylor called them,) rather than to the body, of religion?

I do not deny that there may be officiousness; that there may be enthusiasm; that there may be a spirit of dissent and of innovation, in the proceedings of some branches of this Society, and in the temper of some of its members; and that, where such dangerous characters appear, they should be clearly exposed, and firmly resisted. I do not deny, that this great institution may, by fanatical or designing persons, be made an instrument for the diffusion of schism in the Church, or of disaffection to the government; and that an instrument of such power, and which is capable of being applied or abused to such purposes, should be watched even in its minutest workings, and every aberration from its avowed and legitimate object, should be exposed to public animadversion.

Under this impression, I am not surprised that serious injury to the Church should have been apprehended, from the frequent public meetings of this Society, (I mean in the various affiliated branches,) where every individual disposed to speak,

is permitted freely to express his sentiments, however irrelevant to the subject under discussion, and where, it has been observed, that hostility to the established Church has been sometimes indulged and inculcated, under the plausible appearance of zeal for the conversion of the heathen, and the universal diffusion of true religion.

Though far the greater number of these meetings are conducted with exemplary charity and discretion, yet, in some instances, it must be confessed that a different spirit has prevailed; and that the Churchman, who perhaps has been called to the chair, as a mark of respect for his character and office, may have sometimes been compelled to listen to long and desultory harangues, complimentary to every communion but his own, and placing the Church, to which he belongs, in invidious and mortifying contrast with other Christian societies. He may have heard persons, who, from *whatever* motive, declined to support the interests of this Society, described as equally

insensible to the temporal afflictions, and to the spiritual necessities, of their brethren. He may have seen the Church exposed to jealousy, and her ministers to contempt; and he may, perhaps, have experienced the baneful effect of popular eloquence thus unhappily misapplied, in the clamorous applauses, which might have consistently rung from the galleries of a theatre, but which are as unsuitable to the sober decency of a religious meeting, as the exhibitions, that call them forth, are to the professed (and certainly to the original) object of these assemblies. Still, my friend, even if all this were acknowledged, (and there are very few instances indeed, in which the concession is necessary,) it is but an abuse, and not a necessary consequence, of the Bible Society. It is an abuse, which might have been altogether prevented, by a larger infusion of Church principles and influence, originally; which has been already removed in the great majority of cases; and which may even yet be corrected, wherever it continues to exist, by an accession of Church members,

and by their mild, but steady resistance, to the introduction of any irrelevant topics. Or, if, under present circumstances, or in any peculiar situation, this could not be accomplished without controversy, might not another remedy be found, in a judicious control on the part of the parent Societies, and a discouragement of much public speaking at such local meetings, beyond the necessary reports, and detail of proceedings, which it is the province of the officers of the Society, to communicate?—a detail, in itself so interesting, from the magnitude and importance of the object, as to supersede the necessity of any rhetorical embellishment.

It has indeed been said, that many of these assemblies, by the opportunities which they afford, of exciting the feelings, and stimulating the activity, of those who attend them, furnish large addition to the revenues of the Society, and to the number of its advocates and members: but is it not doubtful, whether such an advantage is not

more than counterbalanced, if they occasion a deterioration of Church principle; encourage a habit of censoriousness, or tend to alienate the minds of the people, from their regular ministers?

But if, under these circumstances, the Churchman apprehends that he shall best discharge his own peculiar duty, and not injure the general cause of religion, by giving his more constant personal assistance to another Society, he may surely find ample scope in both, for the exercise of his Christian activity, without inconsistency, and without interference. While, in his contribution for domestic objects, he supports what he holds to be the soundest branch of the Christian church, he may remember that it is still *but a branch* of the church universal. He may feel it his duty, zealously to promote the progress of the Gospel in distant lands; and though he may very naturally wish, that the primitive and apostolic discipline of his own Church, should be diffused as extensively as her

doctrine, he may not think it absolutely necessary, either to the prosperity of the Establishment, in this country, or to the effectual Christianization of the world, that the admission of her hierarchical constitution abroad, should be inseparable from the reception of her faith.

It may further be considered, that whatever prejudice may have been excited, by any freedom of speech at public meetings, or by the apprehension of other local abuses, it is now too late, even if it were advisable, to arrest the progress of the Bible Society. This great institution, recommended as it is, to all ranks and parties, by its comprehensive principle, will certainly, though perhaps slowly, introduce itself into every district that can support it, and, by the unquestionable excellence of its object, will engage the judgment of all classes in its favour, while it interests their imaginations and affections, by its annual assemblies and reports, and anecdotes and orations. Popularity and publicity are, in fact, inseparable; and a

certain degree of exhibition (if I may call it so), is necessary to the success of every public institution. It is not therefore by a secession from this Society, or by any alteration of its general plan, that injury to the Church seems likely to be prevented; but by the zealous and unanimous co-operation of all the pious members of the Church, to promote its great object, while they resist its abuses. The torrent which the Church cannot resist, she may lead; and God forbid that she should arrest it, if any partial or secular interest could tempt her to obstruct the progress of truth.

One farther prejudice, connected with this subject, which, though unfounded, I fear is unconquerable, is, that entertained by some advocates of the Bible Society, which identifies a jealousy of this mode of circulating the Bible, with an objection to the Bible itself, and imputes to the opponents of their favourite Institution, a desire of limiting the circulation of Scripture. Yet, on the other hand, it must be con-

fessed, that if this jealousy be evinced exclusively by members of the Church, unfavourable conclusions will necessarily follow; and no force of eloquence, or acuteness of argument, will ever disprove these conclusions, till the Church shall assume her proper place, at the head of this great Association, and, without neglecting the local and peculiar objects, to which the exertions of other Societies are directed, shall cordially co-operate in the great work, of diffusing the blessing of the Gospel throughout the world.

And surely, my dear friend, at a time like the present, when the contest is not so much between different Christian sects, as between the kingdoms of Christ and of Satan,—when the duty of communicating religious knowledge, is felt and confessed by every Christian society,—when the zeal of the Churchman, and the prudence of the patriot, are equally interested, in arresting that spirit of infidelity, which degrades and brutifies the nature of man, which deprives

virtue of its sanctions, affliction of its comforts, and death of its hopes, — at a time, when the influence of this baneful principle is working such terrific effects, in the subversion of all civil subordination, and the relaxation of all moral restraint, amongst a very large portion of our people, and the only prospect of an adequate counteraction, seems to be in the universal inculcation of that faith, which is the parent of order, and industry, and peace, and benevolence, and virtue, — surely, at such a time, if minor or prudential considerations, restrain the zeal of *any* class of Christians, the prejudice, that charges them with indifference to the sacred cause of religion, may grieve, but cannot surprise us.

Allow me one observation more. If some of the Churchmen who have joined the Bible Society, are supposed to hold doctrines, which the majority of their brethren disapprove, and if the farther diffusion of such doctrines, be apprehended from their connection with this Society, nothing seems so likely to prevent such a consequence, (or at least to

remedy the injury resulting from it) as a large accession of more orthodox members.

I have been led farther than I intended, as different instances occurred to my recollection, of the influence of prejudice in the view of this question. You may think it was beginning a great way from the subject, to take up the controversy at the Reformation; but those prefatory remarks will not appear irrelevant, if you recollect, that one prominent objection to the Bible Society, has been drawn from the supposed reluctance of the reformers, to commit the Bible freely to the people.

You want no exhortation to the support of this society, either as a point of duty or of prudence. If you did, I should be inclined to recommend to your perusal, three excellent letters, at the close of a small volume, intituled, "Letters to a Serious Enquirer after Divine Truth," by the Reverend Edward Cooper.

It is a noble proof of the value of this great institution, and is, I believe, a strict and unexaggerated truth, that the blessing which its members are associated to dispense, has flowed back upon themselves in large abundance ;—that compassion for the destitute state of those who are perishing for lack of knowledge, has awakened in many who have been made instrumental to this relief, ~~a conviction~~ of the value of that Revelation, which, in the fullness of temporal prosperity, and the pride of intellectual improvement, was too often received with little gratitude, and neglected with little compunction.

May you and I, my dear friend, continue to feel the worth of this inestimable gift ; and may we endeavour to evince our gratitude, by obedience to its precepts, and zeal for its universal diffusion. Our Church and Country, and each of us individually, have been signally favoured, in the dispensations of a gracious Providence. Oh, may we not, by an insolent neglect, or a churlish

monopoly, provoke the divine justice to a revocation of the blessings vouchsafed to us; nor be called upon in judgment, to surrender the talents, which we refuse to improve !

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

LONDON :

Printed by A. & R. Spottiswoode
New-Street Square.

